

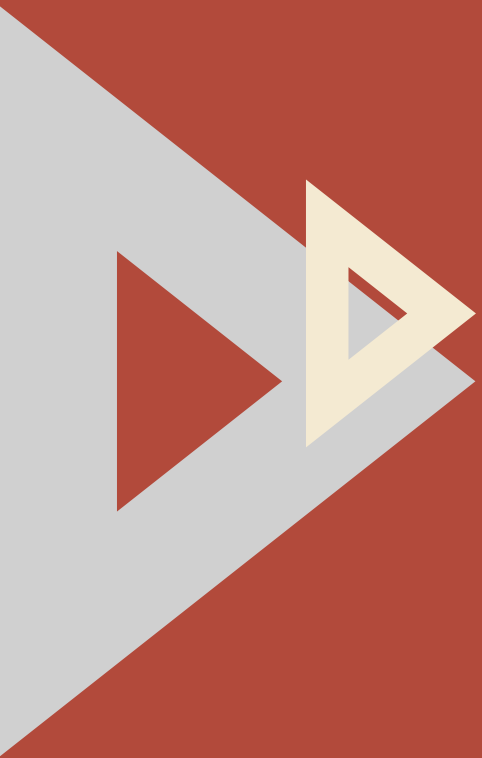


OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

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, grey, and yellow, pointing towards the right.
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

Marxism vocabulary

Marxism, like many philosophies of science, has a lot of jargon. In the U.S., much of this is unfamiliar to us because we are much more educated in vocabulary related to our Enlightenment-inspired government (liberty, freedom, sovereignty, rights, individualism, property rights). Some Marxist vocab that we covered last week included the *bourgeois revolution* (aka a democratic revolution), *commodity fetishism*, *surplus value*, *petty bourgeoisie*, *orthodox marxism*, *economism*, and *Fordism*. Today, we'll discuss many of these and add to the pile some others like **Marxism-Leninism**, **Bolshevism**, **class consciousness**, **vanguard of the proletariat**, and **alienation**.

Syndicalist methods of organizing combined with his ability to tap into American society's spiritualism brought Eugene V. Debs fame

America, for better or worse, has always been fundamentally tied to spiritual principles — many of the Enlightenment ideals like liberty and freedom are spiritual (as opposed to material) in principle. In the Nineteenth Century, the US experiences two new Great Awakenings during which the majority of the denominations within Protestantism that we see today are founded and/or form their basic tenets. By the end of the Nineteenth Century and into the first decades of the Twentieth, the US had become an industrial nation, meaning it had an industrial working class. Corruption and an unregulated economy and work environment was not met with Americans — immigrants and nationals alike — laying down and taking it. **Debs, whose popularity bloomed after the Pullman Strike is supported by the ARU with him at the helm, was a lauded leader of the nascent Socialist Party** for his ability to speak to white Americans' spiritual belief in a higher power & their characteristically American belief in individual liberty and justice for hardworking men. Though Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose Party is often remembered as being the electoral representative of trust-busting anticorruption campaigns, it is Debs who ran for president five times, including once from jail, and as we will see, it is the Socialist Party that pressures the culminating New Deal-era Democratic Party of FDR.

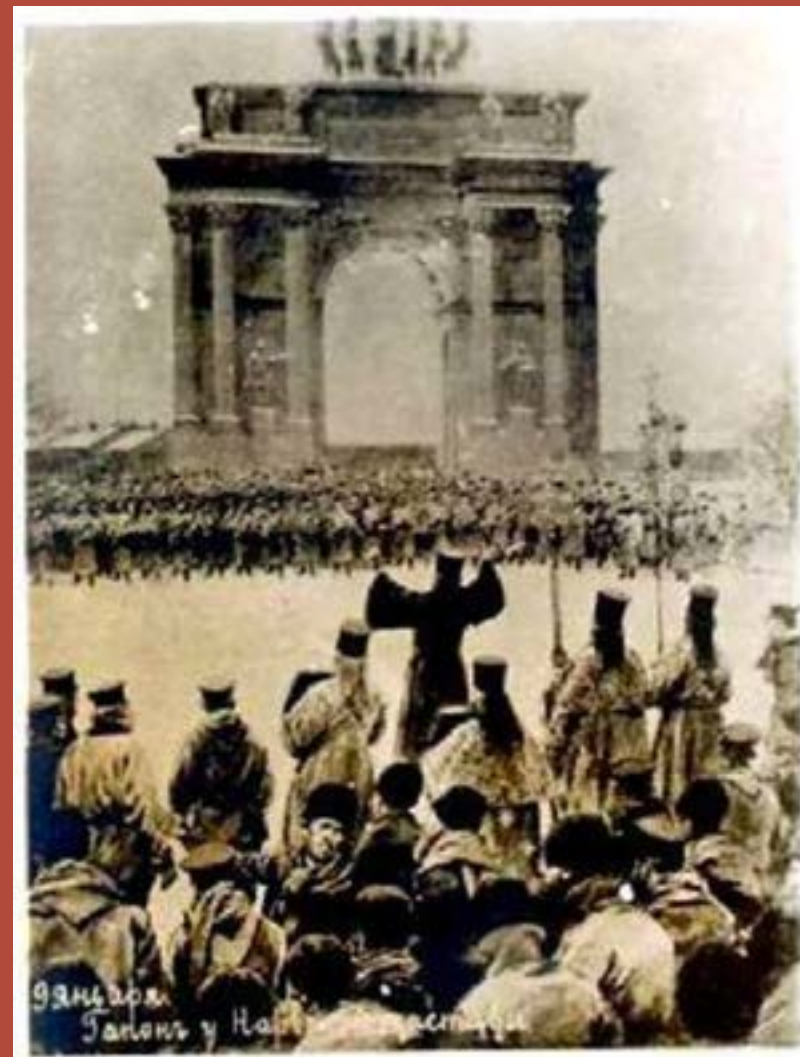
▶ RUSSIA'S REVOLUTIONS

October Manifesto (10/17/05) establishes an elected government but is met with both backlash from royalist conservatives and the power of the Tsar remained largely unquestioned.

WWI (1914-1918) was a staggering loss of two million Russian soldiers by 1915 alone, including half to Germany as POWs.



Jan. 22 1905 **Bloody Sunday** – After the embarrassing defeats of the inept Tsarist government by the newly industrialized Japanese military during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), **over 150,000 Russian workers** (many women and children) peacefully march on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. The workers present a petition demanding a popularly elected assembly, better working conditions and wages, reduced hours, and universal suffrage for all men. The Imperial Guard fire into the crowd and the march descends into chaos and panic. News of the events set off insurrections throughout Russia, including aboard navy vessels like the Potemkin.

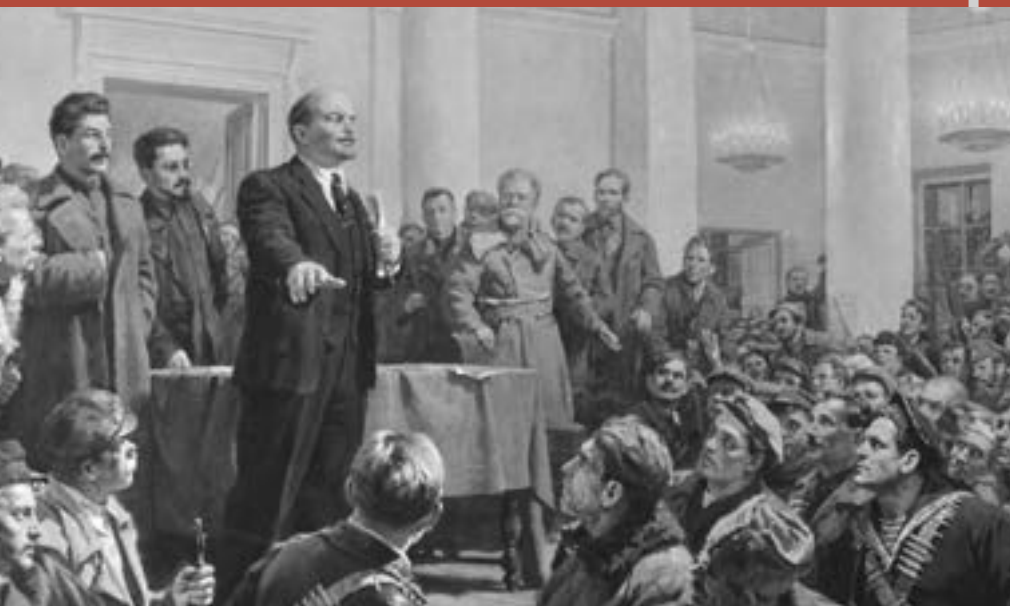


Though it is set in Odessa and aboard a naval ship, we might see in Sergei Eisenstein's **Battleship Potemkin** during the famous scene with a baby carriage tumbling down the steps as memorializing Bloody Sunday, photographed to the left.

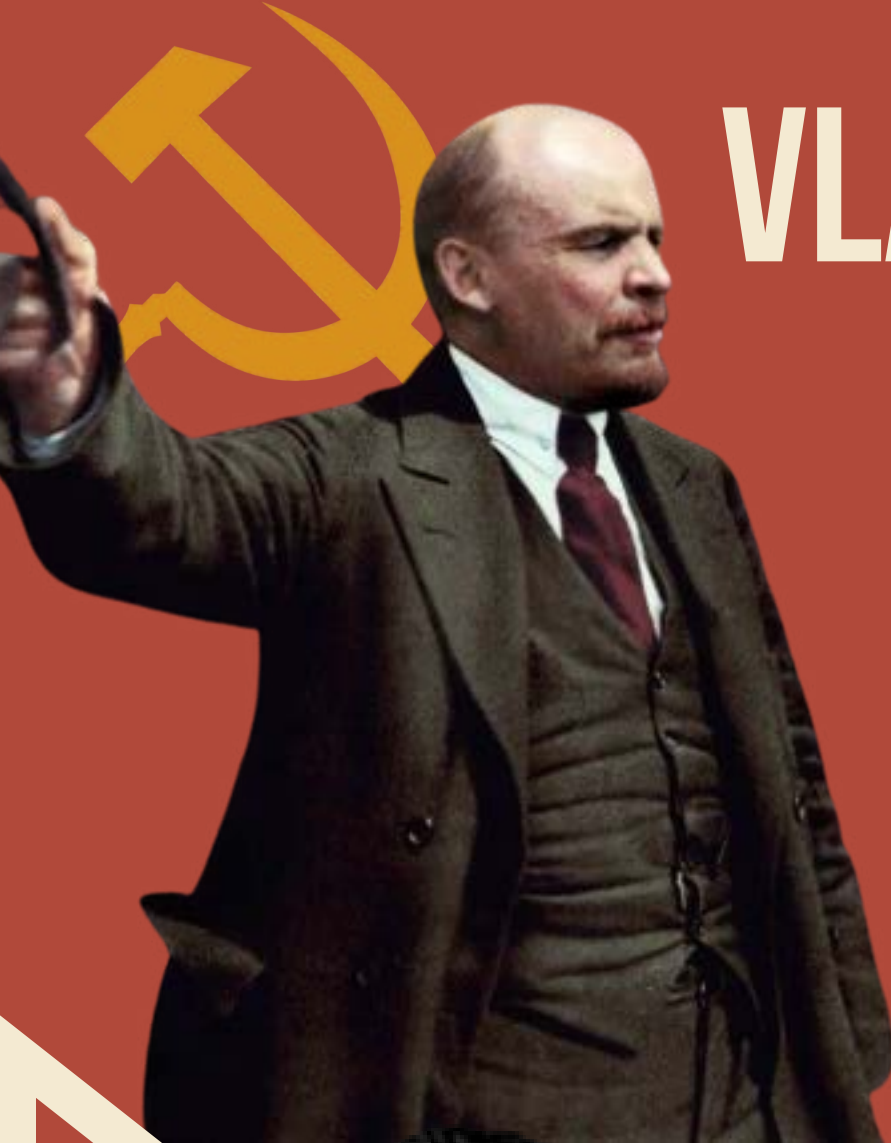
▶ RUSSIA'S REVOLUTIONS



February 2, 1917 **February Revolution** – Due to the ill-equipped and badly led leadership of the constitutional monarchy under Nicholas II during WWI, Petrograd (St. Petersburg) was in the midst of a strike. Transportation had failed and food was going undistributed from the city's warehouses while crowds of people in the bitter cold waited in bread lines until a riot broke out. When the army arrives to reinforce the police, though, they disarm the police and join the workers. During the succeeding months, 2500 elected representatives from factories and military units in the Petrograd Soviet (workers' council) are organized by the Social-Democratic Workers' Party while the peasantry is organized by the Socialist Revolutionary Party.



October 24, 1917 **October Revolution** – Between May and June of 1917, Leon Trotsky (a leading figure of Russian Socialism who had been living in exile in the US) returns and discusses a program of alliance with Lenin. They plot to overthrow the provisional government established in February after Nicholas abdicated while on the front. On 24 October, Bolsheviks stage a largely nonviolent coup with Soviet soldiers taking control of strategic points throughout Petrograd. the Congress of Soviets convenes the next day and forms a Bolshevik government with Lenin as its leader. The day after that, land is redistributed to create peasant communes with compensation to previous owners, banks are nationalized, workers are given complete control of factories, and a plan of election for a constituent assembly to replace the temporary council is formed.



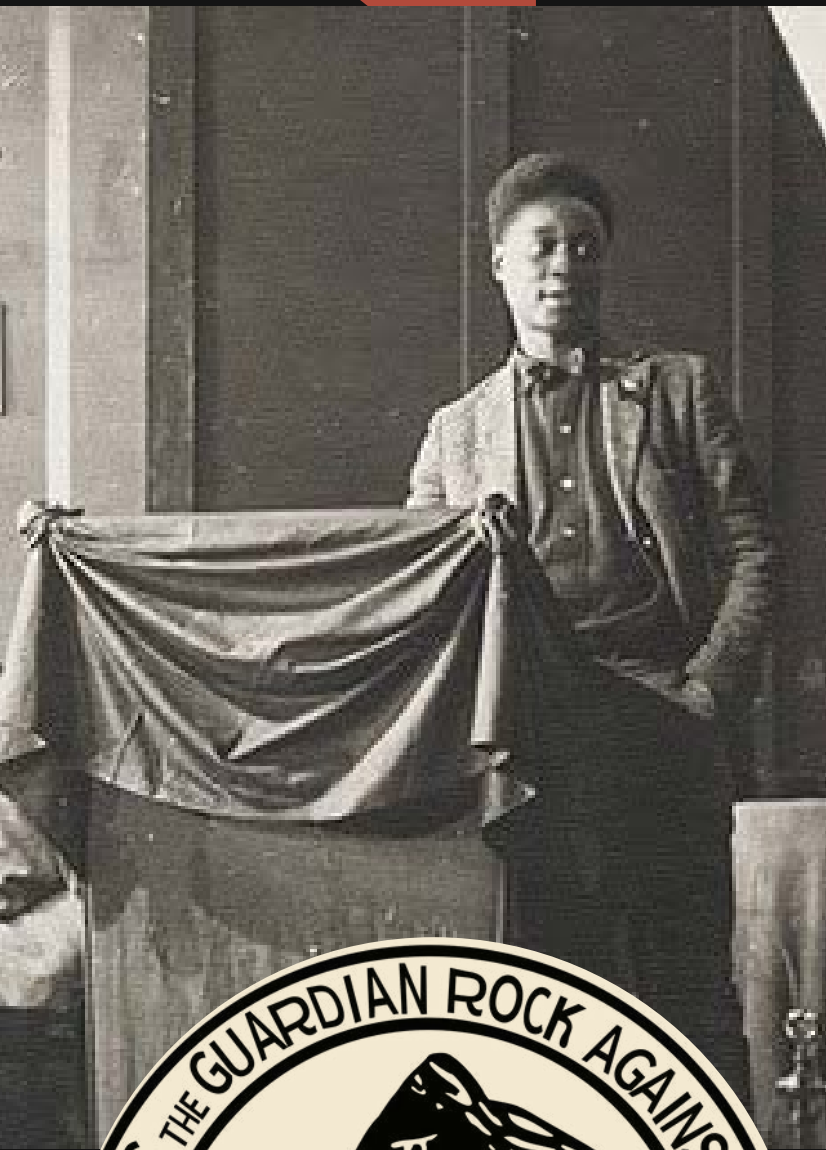
VLADIMIR ULYANOV LENIN, MARXISM-LENINISM

- vanguard party – in *What Is To Be Done?* (1903), Lenin proposes that a successful socialist party working toward revolution should be the vanguard of the proletariat, the more enlightened group that is to lead to proletariat toward revolution. Lenin, like the syndicalists before him, believed that a vanguard party would include members of a '**bourgeois intelligentsia**' that could activate the working class, which he believed would only reach 'trade union consciousness,' not 'revolutionary consciousness' on their own.
- Bolshevik v. Menshevik split – the Bolshevik faction (and later its own party) of the Social-Democratic Workers' Party believed that, rather than allowing for the bourgeois revolution to bring about a capitalist economy that would grow the proletariat to be the dominant class (what the Menshevik's proposed), Marxism could be adapted to the specific material circumstances of Russia. Bolsheviks viewed the Menshevik program as problematic since it involved working **liberal democrats** (an alliance that, as Lenin would well have studied, led to the downfall of the **Paris Commune of 1871**).
- Marxism-Leninism – The tendency of Marxism popularized by the Communist International that argued (against Marx and Engels) that the proletarian class must be directed toward revolution, as they would not automatically seek it upon reaching **class consciousness**. After this, a dictatorship of the proletariat must be established to do away with counterinsurgency and establish bureaucratic order. Imperialism, which Lenin called the highest stage of capitalism, according to the tendency, was the result of exporting exploitative labor practices to the developing world (colonies).



BLACK BOLSHEVISM

HEIDEMAN



- With the establishment of the Communist International (Third International), the USSR becomes the predominant socialist power of the world. This means that, at least until the horrors of Stalin's Russia are made clear, radicals everywhere often look to Moscow for its guidance. The Bolsheviks control the Comintern, as well, meaning they are able to exert their power throughout the world. So long as Lenin is in power, Marxism-Leninism represents the liberation of imperial colonies through national independence movements supported by the Soviets.
- In 1921, for instance, gay Jamaican poet and activist Claude McKay (left) speaks at the Comintern on 'The Negro Question.' In his speech, he argues that the labor movements throughout the world, but especially in the U.S. will always fail so long as they refuse to acknowledge and work against the white supremacy that exists within the movement. Like Lenin's argument for allying the proletariat with the peasantry, McKay makes the case that a successful movement for workers' liberation will and indeed must include Black people.
- In 1919 (the same year as CPUSA's founding), Cyril Briggs founded the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), an underground organization of Black radicals. Briggs, who had previously created his own Black radical paper *The Crusader* after he was fired during WWI for his writing against the war, founded ABB in response to the Red Summer - a period of literally dozens of riots and lynchings throughout the US by white supremacists.

CYRIL BRIGGS

HEIDEMAN



- Briggs had originally been inspired by Woodrow Wilson's "right to self-determination" in his 13-point proposal for post-war Europe. But he soon realized that Wilson had no intention of applying this concept to the colonized world. (Wilson, who had been a professor and then president of Princeton before becoming president, had written a history textbook praising the Confederacy and the KKK - think *Birth of a Nation* - and reinstituted segregation in federal agencies after it had been desegregated).
- Briggs posed the ABB as a self-defense force of Black radicals who sought the liberation and protection of their peoples. He believed only militant struggle would bring about revolution and end to white supremacist terrorism and empire.
- *The Crusader* was investigated during WWI by the Committee on Public Information (CPI) - Wilson's propaganda machine - for its antiwar sentiment and its "abuse of the white man." Briggs later wrote of this, "To have been listed as 'well-behaved' in the eyes of Crackerdom would have forced us to cease publication."
- While Briggs was always a radical, he was not always a Marxist. He was suspicious of white workers, who often proved their loyalty to race over class.
- By 1920, however, Briggs had been reading more of Marx and sitting in on lectures on Marxist theory by folks such as Hubert Harrison ("the father of Harlem radicalism").

AFRICAN BLOOD BROTHERHOOD

HEIDEMAN



- In the early years of the USSR, the Soviets granted the right of self-determination to all of the colonized nations. Reciting a litany of imperial crimes committed by France and Britain, Briggs asked, "Is this the 'democracy' to which the spread of Bolshevism is a menace? Then may God advance the spread of Bolshevism through Europe, Asia, and Africa, and in every country where oppression stalks!"
- Briggs' growing identification with Marxism and the Russian Revolution led him, and much of the rest of the leadership of the ABB (including Claude McKay), to join the Communist Party in the summer of 1921.
- Briggs and the other Black radicals who looked to Russia did so because they believed that racism and colonialism could not be defeated without a total remaking of their society.
- The sheer scale and brutality of American white supremacy in those years, crystalized during the Red Summer of 1919, dealt a serious blow to the idea that racism could be eliminated either through Black Americans reforming their own behavior, as the followers of Booker T. Washington suggested, or through a gradual process of changing laws and changing minds, as was the strategy of the NAACP.
- At the same time, the explosion of class struggle across the globe, from Italy to Russia to the U.S. (which witnessed the biggest strike wave in its history in 1919), helped make concrete the hope that another world was possible. In this context, Black radicals like Briggs saw the liberation of Black people as part of a global insurrection against oppression everywhere.

PAUL BUHLE, MARXISM IN THE UNITED STATES

- Faith in the national citizen-workers' republic and in a mass culture breakthrough were simultaneously destroyed in the world war and its reactionary aftermath. So, communist thinkers rushed to articulate a substitution.
- In place of the putative worker-bohemian alliance for a new world culture, they married Communism as class value of the producers to Communism as representative of the world's suffering nationalities and races. Thus, the National Question now openly defined American Marxism, despite all official Communist efforts to render nationality into class.
- American Leninists confronted other problems unknown in Lenin's pre-revolutionary Russia, and groped for satisfactory solutions. Yet, Communist theoreticians and the anti-Communist accusers shared similar delusions in the power of a few to shape history.
- The consumer economy more than any Marxist doctrine ultimately defined viable left strategy as the demand for a share of national abundance.
- The rising tide of anti-fascism set the framework for other demands, pluralism in America. The Communists had solidified their influence among those who identified simultaneously with Communism and with the social changes they themselves had helped to bring about.
- Even as unrest continued to rock working class life, the Socialist Party virtually collapsed and the two Communist entities spent their energy in internecine polemics. A field day for government infiltrators and wild-eyed sectarians, 1919-21 passed in a rush of charges and counter-charges, arrests, deportations and disillusionment.
- Decentralization of political initiative, with the inevitable persistence of old habits, encouraged a wide experimentation at the local level that remained largely invisible to Party leaders.

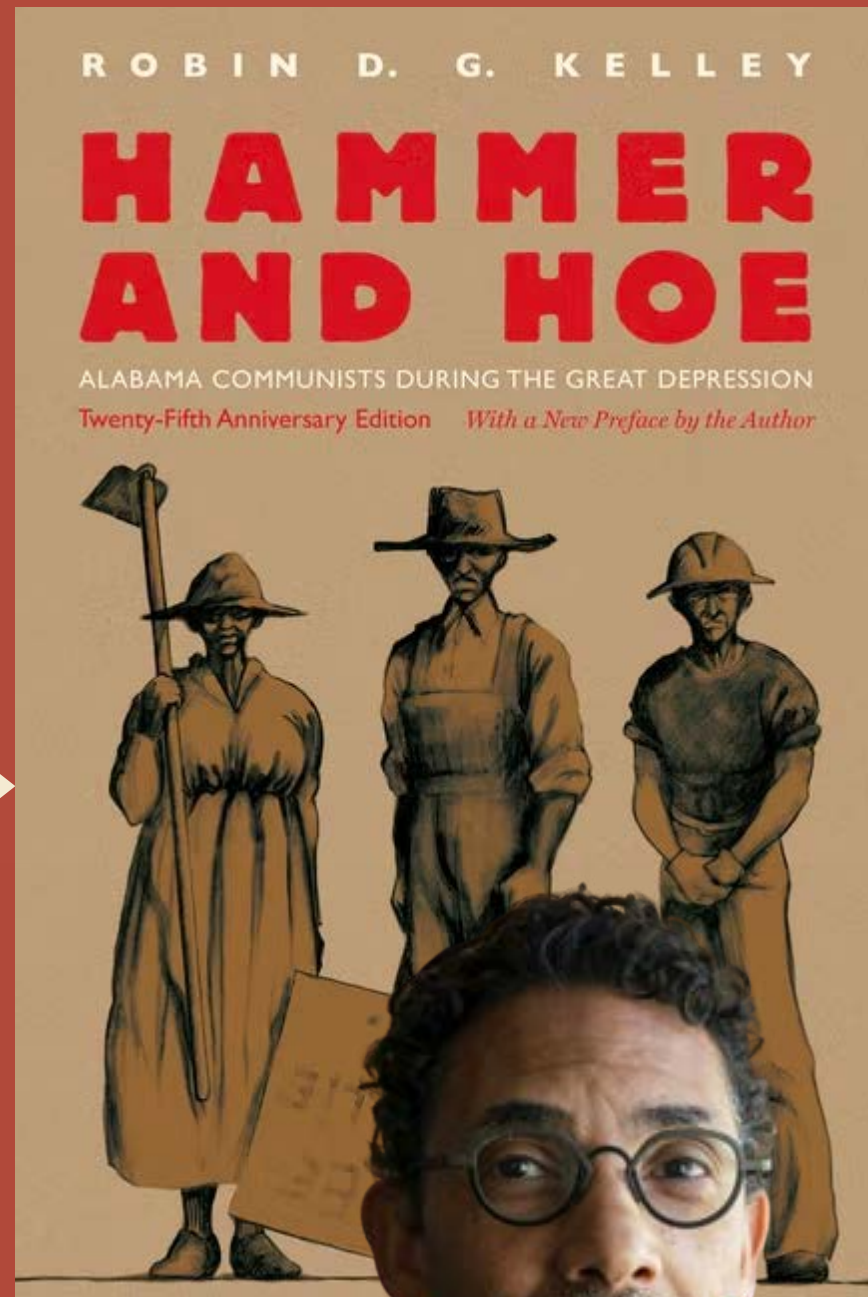
CASE STUDY: ALABAMA COMMUNISTS

- The Party encouraged the uncertain relationship between revolutionary politics and ethnic culture, providing the immigrants with essential services: labor defense, propaganda, English-language spokesmen and organizational contacts. The groups in return gave the bulk of funds for the Party's operation, produced enthusiastic crowds, and formed an authentic radical proletariat.
- The prevalence of Black people in the CP earned it the epithet "n***** party" throughout the South. These uninitiated men and women were not intellectuals sympathetic to left-wing movements, nor were they frustrated labor organizers weary of the pace of change. With the possible exception of Montgomery Party leader John Beans, Alabama's black cadre of unskilled and semiskilled industrial workers, sharecroppers, domestics, and housewives had rural roots and no previous experience with radical movements.
- **Alabama's black cadre interpreted Communism through the lenses of their own cultural world** and the international movement of which they were now a part. Far from being a slumbering mass waiting for Communist direction, black working people entered the movement with a rich culture of opposition that sometimes contradicted, sometimes reinforced the Left's vision of class struggle. The Party offered more than a vehicle for social contestation; it offered a framework for understanding the roots of poverty and racism, linked local struggles to world politics, challenged not only the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy but the petit bourgeois racial politics of the black middle class, and created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could analyze, discuss, and criticize the society in which they lived.
- From the outset Communist organizers created **educational structures** to turn ordinary workers into Marxists.

CASE STUDY: ALABAMA COMMUNISTS

- In the rural areas YCL study groups were very popular because they served as surrogate schools for those unable to attend public schools. The role that these youth-led, makeshift classes played cannot be overestimated in a region where black children attended school on an average of three months of the year and annual educational expenditures for black schools averaged \$3.99 per child compared with \$38.11 per white child.
- Communist education, whether through reading or oral transmission, introduced poor rural and urban blacks to international politics and, in turn, placed their own local, seemingly insignificant struggles within a world context.
- Late in 1934, eight robed Klansmen broke into the home of North Birmingham Communist Steve Simmons and administered a nearfatal beating. When his assailants later discovered-ironically by reading the Daily Worker-that he had survived the beating, they paid him another visit. But this time he had barred the doors and windows, and he used his shotgun to disperse the crowd, injuring one member of the mob.
- When black Communist Saul Davis was kidnapped from his Bessemer home, stripped bare, and whipped for several hours, he defiantly returned to Bessemer to work on behalf of the ILD, even before his wounds had completely healed. **Such actions should not be interpreted simply as individual acts of heroism or recklessness. Instead, they represented a broader change in attitude, a growing comfort in the strength of collective action and outside support.** Although vigilantes slowed Communist efforts, successful resistance to their attacks neutralized their efficacy because, like lynching, vigilante violence depends ultimately on the overall impression it makes on the community.

CASE STUDY: ALABAMA COMMUNISTS



- Much like the **trickster** characters in African-American folklore, many black Alabama Communists expressed great pride in their ability to outsmart the bosses, as revealed by the ingenious ways activists distributed leaflets in direct violation of seditious literature ordinances and constant police surveillance. In Birmingham, black women posing as laundresses picked up bundles of leaflets, stencils, and paper from the homes of white Communists and smuggled the materials out in baskets of laundry.
- When leaflets would not suffice, Birmingham radicals left their mark in other ways. While visiting Birmingham in 1934, Myra Page came across the letters "ILD carved into what was once the wet, fresh concrete of a new sidewalk.
- Communist tabloids that published "workers' correspondence" offer another, more personalized view of radical consciousness



NEXT CLASS...

June 24 - Authoritarian Collectivisms

Michael Harrington is committed to one of his central tenets about socialism: that socialism is the only way through which democracy can actually be realized. He spends an entire chapter discussing the failures of self-identified communist and socialist countries in which he argues that these are *not* examples of socialism, but of *authoritarian collectivism*.

- Ch. 3 "Authoritarian Collectivisms" from *Socialism: Past and Future* by Michael Harrington
- The remainder of Ch. 3 "Leninism in America" from *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* by Paul Buhle
- passages from *Maoism and the Chinese Revolution: A Critical Introduction* by Elliott Liu
- passages from *The Permanent Revolution* by Leon Trotsky
- Ch. 6, "The Third World Revolution" from *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality* by Bhaskar Sunkara
- Checkout the Flashcards: <https://quizlet.com/557705059/marxism-in-america-terminology-flash-cards/>