



OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

MARXISM IN AMERICA

History, Theory, Culture

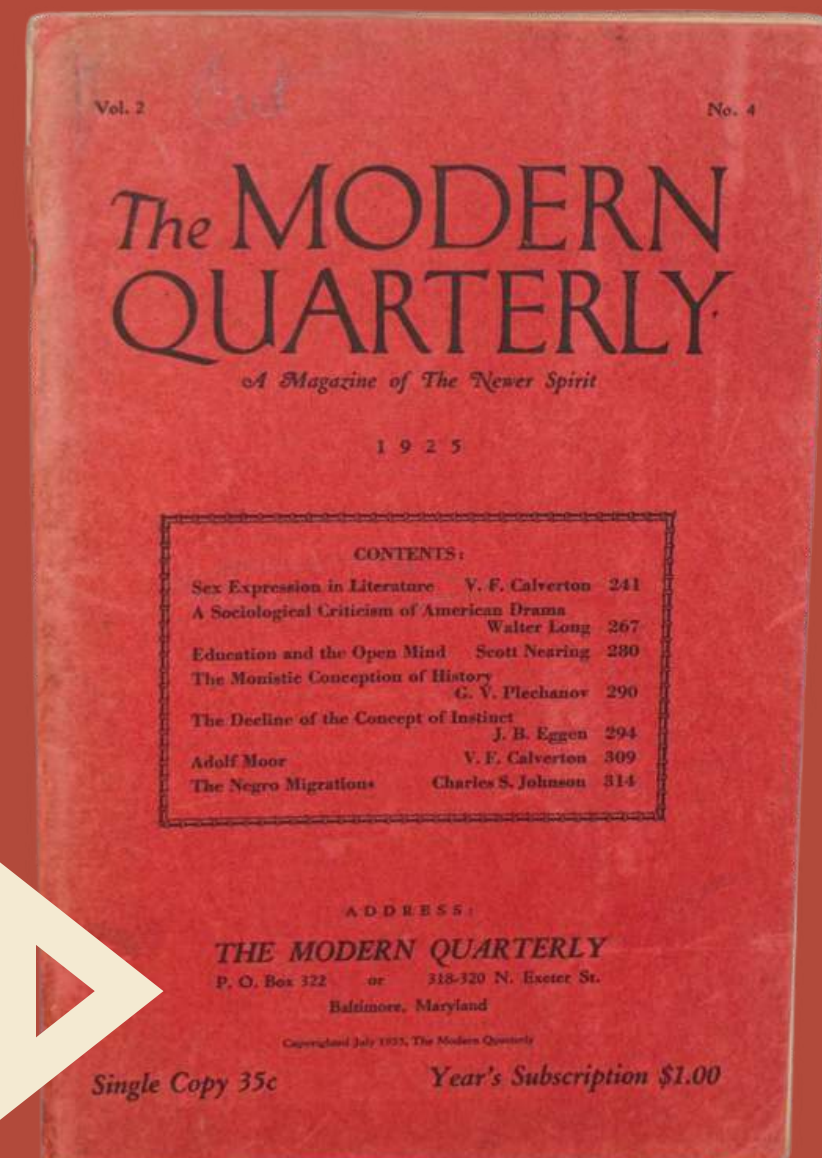
OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2

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 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

▶ WHY CULTURE CRITIQUE?

- **Frankfurt School** – the Frankfurt School was an institute of well-known scholars who established what is today called 'critical theory' but was at the time called 'culture critique.' This change in nomenclature is for a variety of reasons. Namely, when British cultural studies is established, the main theorists behind its establishment refer to the culture critique as 'critical theory.'
 - Frankfurt school alum include Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin
 - Many of these individuals fled Nazism (though some, like Benjamin, were not successful) not only because their affiliation with Marxism but because of their Jewish heritage
 - The significance and contribution of the critical theorists was to 'update' Marxism for the Twentieth Century – how this was done depended on the theorist, but many of them combined the 'major theorists' of the nineteenth century (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Weber) in order to critique the events of the Twentieth Century. Hannah Arendt very famously makes famous the term 'totalitarianism' in her comparative study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in which she decries both Nazism and Stalinism as despotic, imperialistic, and anti-republican.
- **Antonio Gramsci** – at this point in the semester, I would introduce students to a little known Italian Marxist by the name Gramsci, who was imprisoned for his participation and leadership in labor struggles by the Mussolini regime; in prison, he wrote prolifically and his *Prison Notebooks*, when published, became immensely influential to the cultural critics of the Twentieth Century. The significance of Gramsci's 'update' to Marxism was his focus on what he called the **war of position**, or the use of cultural hegemony to overturn the naturalization of capitalism.

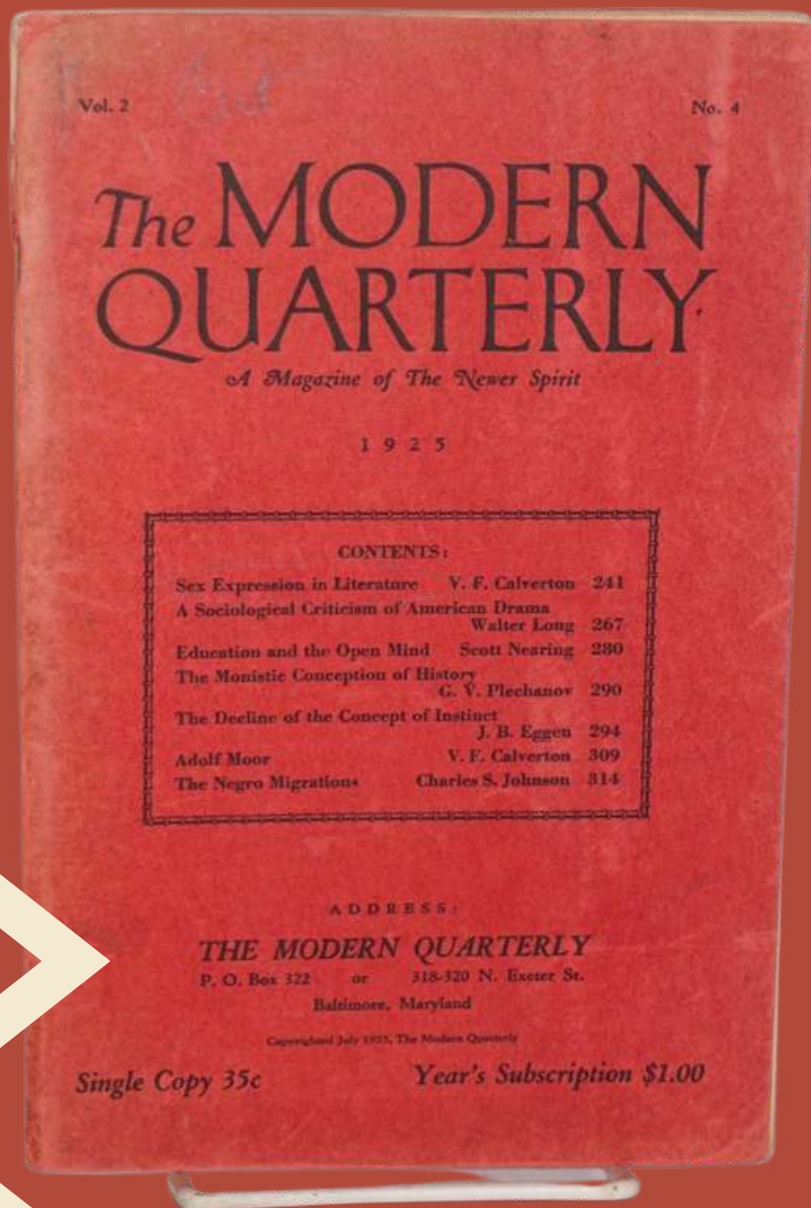
CALVERTON & THE MODERN QUARTERLY



- All radical critiques of culture were prefigured in the work of one extraordinary but symptomatic figure, V.F. Calverton, whose worldview his collaborator Samuel Schmalhausen called 'revolutionary culturalism.' Born at the turn of the century, Calverton came of age in time to imbibe the revolutionary hopes of 1917-19, but not to live them as political practice. He summed up the Marxist intellectual of his generation:
 - he spoke to a new white-collar following. Well educated and intensely curious about itself, this group stood on the verge of a cultural radicalism. It now included sprinklings of Blacks politicized by their condition, and a large number of women restive at the limited gains of suffrage.
 - For Calverton and his magazine, aimed at the intelligentsia, the distinction between a proletarian culture and the bourgeois sciences never quite emerged.
- Calverton himself reasoned in a common sense fashion that literature would become, had to become, the expression of the masses. Unlike the literary communists at the end of the twenties, he did not purport to create with his scant resources a proletarian literature himself, but to understand the background and current conditions for its future development.
- Calverton never intended his literary analysis as an end in itself, but sought rather to make it a symptomatic study of wider society. He unfortunately grasped the Marxist component as a strict materialist perspective. In the words of his friend and confidant, Arthur Calhoun, Art is but a reflex of the economic basis of society." From that all-too-narrow standpoint, only elaboration remained. Constrained by a mechanical Marxism, Calverton nevertheless acted upon the implications with great vigor.
- Altogether, Calverton's ideas constituted an extraordinary advance toward producing a systematized perspective on American life.



CALVERTON & THE MODERN QUARTERLY



- Literature evolved in three great stages of human culture: the pre-industrial culture dominated by the nobility; the bourgeois culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and the proletarian culture from the last quarter of the nineteenth century forward. 'Liberation' signified the step-by-step shedding of past constraints that had prevented the full development of a realistic social literature. American writers needed to lose their 'colonial complex', which relied on English literary models and on a Puritan moralism devastating to subsequent American intellectual methods. Equally they had to shed the repressive sentimentalism of the nineteenth century and to jettison, finally, the petty-bourgeois individualist response to a bourgeois consciousness which had itself only appeared on the stage. Soon, the working class would create its own cultural products, joined by the special folkish elements alive in Black culture and by the freed sexual-social expression of women. This massive 'psychological' preparation for a working-class seizure of power would then be understood in its true significance. The Left (even if Calverton did not bluntly say so) would be revolutionized along the road to a definitive social transformation.
- Communist abuse destroyed Calverton, their annihilating attacks upon his independence leaving him only a fringe audience of anti-Stalinist intellectuals who mostly enrolled in the Trotskyist movement or moved steadily away from politics altogether. In a larger sense, the specific project that the *Modern Quarterly* had launched in the early 1920s had failed with the crash in '29, and would revive in more sophisticated forms only after the Second World War with the embrace of critical theory

WEB DUBOIS

- WEB DuBois, who had educated the Black American about modern ideas and race pride...had steadily embraced Marxism in unprecedented ways despite Communist orthodoxy's cold shoulder to his work.
- With *Black Reconstruction*, we have the explosive assertion that the failure of US labor to throw itself behind the Black struggle had been an international calamity, for 'the world wept and is still weeping and blind with tears of blood' from the consequences. Unlike the 'progressive' history that treated Black people as passive agents of voracious bourgeoisie and unlike the Communist efforts to add in the Black struggle as a revolutionary afterthought, DuBois looked to Black people as the central figures in the American historic melodrama, the key to the unique nature of the society.
- DuBois had been gesturing in the direction of this conclusion since his earlier study of the slave trade and its consequences upon both the south and the north. But the effect of the First World War in revealing Europe's bankruptcy, together with the impact of the Russian Revolution in throwing up new forces on the side of the colonial peoples, forced DuBois to re-examine Radical Reconstruction as a turning point in Western history. He called it 'the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen... a tragedy that beggared the Greek ...an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution.

WEB DUBOIS

- DuBois showed a certain clumsiness of categories, interpreting the massive slave abandonment of the plantations during the conflict as a 'general strike', the strongest term he could discover for a concerted and decisive mass action. The notion of Reconstruction state governments as dictatorships of the proletariat likewise rings strangely, recalling the kind of jargon the Communists at their worst moments misapplied. But these mis constructions were hardly the issue that vexed DuBois' detractors.
- The theoretical implications that could be seen so dearly by DuBois at the time, and which reflected so badly on white radicals of whatever affiliation, touched at the core of orthodox Marxism's limitations in the United States. DuBois had written in 1921 that the Russian Revolution might indeed be the key event in modern history—and yet still not be demonstrably the answer to the Color Question. Neither its Vanguard Party or its millenarian proletarianism were self-evidently applicable. The history of Blacks in the USA and in the colonial world did not have to fit into the Marxist context; Marxism had to fit into theirs or lose its relevance, most especially in the United States.

► CONSTRUCTIVISM, FASHION, MODERNISM

- In the early 1920s, a group of artists known as the constructivists were determined to clothe the New Man and New Woman in simple and functional clothes of geometrical lines, fitting the political and ideological program of the new Bolshevik socialist state. This chapter explores the trajectory of the constructivist revolutionary ideas, and their various sartorial expressions, in both utopian and commercial variants, in the Soviet Union, postsocialist Russia, and in the West.
- The constructivists could not accomplish their uncompromising utopian goal, as the Russian economy was in total disarray in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The consecutive rise of Stalinism from the late 1920s onward, accompanied by a new model of the planned economy, additionally crushed the constructivists' utopian project both politically and organizationally. However, similar utopian visions appeared within the movement known as International Modernism in the late 1920s, from Bauhaus to the Czech functionalist modernism, and are also present in the work of some contemporary artists, dress and fashion designers who draw on the original constructivist notions.
- From the 1920s, categories such as functionality, simplicity, and comfort increasingly migrated from the austere world of Russian and international constructivism into the field of international fashion. Ahead of the constructivists, the Italian futurist Thayaht (real name Ernesto Michahelles) proposed his all-purpose overalls—la Tuta—in an advertisement published in the respectful bourgeois newspaper La Nazione in Florence in June 1920. Thayaht designed his Tuta as a simple outfit, to be cut along straight lines, fashioned from modest fabrics such as khaki and linen, and easy to make by oneself. There was the same economy of fabric consumption, of effort, and of energy in Rodchenko and Thayaht's overalls, but Thayaht was commercially minded.⁶⁵ However, Tuta did not become an everyday dress for all sections of society, as envisaged by its designer. Instead, endowed with a modernist credo due to its novel, geometric cut, Thayaht's Tuta, was swiftly acknowledged in the world of Parisian haute couture, which, at the time, was equally modernist and eager to experiment. From 1922, Thayaht practiced his new radical aesthetics at the Madeleine Vionnet fashion house in Paris, designing a series of Tuta-style dresses, and minimalist air travel ensembles, nevertheless executed in the most refined fabrics.



CHILDREN OF MEN



NEXT CLASS...

July 7 - After Leninism (1940-1960)

- Ch. 6 "After Leninism" in *Marxism in the United States* by Paul Buhle
- *Bee Movie*