



OLLI SUMMER 1 & 2, 2022

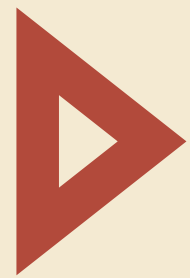
# MARXISM IN AMERICA

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



# RECAP

## IN EUROPE

**The Frankfurt School** was founded and prospered in Europe during the 30s and 40s and would later be hugely influential to what developed as 'academic Marxism' in the West. Western Marxism is very vested in academic study, intellectualism, and not until the New Left does it become more rooted in activism. The Critical Theorists were looking to update and combine Marx with Nietzsche, Weber, and Freud. Meanwhile, in Italy, **Antonio Gramsci** is arrested for his labor organizing and, while in prison, writes prolifically about how significant to Marxists the ***cultural hegemony*** should be, as it leads in the war of position before any war of maneuver. His writings will be the most influential of Twentieth Century Marxists.

## IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, **V.F. Calverton** begins the culture critique, what will become a concerted inclusion in the left of intellectual autodidacts with the *Modern Quarterly*. Like the Gramsci of America, Calverton was interested in how cultural artifacts (especially literature) was the carbon copy of the material life: he was interested in understanding the ways that culture reflected the realities of common folk. Unlike Gramsci, he does not make the argument of the reverse: that the common folk can reflect the culture (he is a strict Materialist). **W.E.B. DuBois**, founder of American sociology, publishes in 1935 *Black Reconstruction*, his materialist analysis of the Reconstruction era and the place of Black agency in understanding this era. He argues that the slave rebellions were 'general strikes' and that the failure of Reconstruction to bring about proletarian revolution was due to white laborers' refusal to consolidate power with newly freed Black people.

# ▶ ASSUAGING THE WORKING CLASS: MAKING THE MIDDLE CLASS

- While many of the New Deal's successful programs were the agenda of the Late Nineteenth Century Socialist Party's platform, the FDR Administration and more broadly the Democratic Party was gifted the credit for these reforms. The New Deal not only ended many of the Great Depression domestic issues; it also created a middle class out of what was a mostly working class public. In short, it brought many in the urban north and midwest out of poverty and into the middle class (1950s) America that is looked on with so much nostalgia
- From the perspective of capitalists, this is due to the success of capitalism: the Twentieth Century was the American century — industry was booming, and once the labor reforms became law and WWII began, America was able to take its seat as the superpower it remains. This was economically due to the Taylorism/Fordism we have discussed before: managerial bureaucracy at factories grew into conglomerates/corporations; paying wages at a rate that would allow a recoup of those monies when employees buy products they helped make (along with segregated housing, the steady rise of suburbia) made most workers feel they lived better lives.
- From the perspective of the Marxist, this 'better life' is due to the quality of life measured by value of property and assets owned. When WWII ends, the GI Bill sets every family up with (male) household leadership with a college degree and wages that seem to reflect this; though wages likely increased in-line with inflation and were adjusted upward when women were excommunicated from the workforce or siloed into their own areas (wages drop for secretaries when women become the majority of secretarial workers). The Marxist would point out that the so-called rise of the American middle class came at the cost of wage equality for women and ethnic/racial minorities; the embrace of pristine factory-made (name-brand) items like the television, the vacuum cleaner, the refrigerator, and so on as evidence that you've made it.



# ▶ ASSUAGING THE WORKING CLASS: MAKING THE MIDDLE CLASS

- Many of the trade-offs of the so-called rise of the American middle class in the 1950s detract from what is looked back upon as a nostalgic era that exemplifies the excellence of American capitalism:
  - a. embrace of technological advances gives us television, but the trade-off is the expansion of media conglomerates that now control messaging to an entire country, and the beginning of the 'culture wars' when folks like Elvis Presley begin appearing on television sets seeming to encourage 'promiscuity' in young people—put another way, there is backlash that throws wood to the fire of bigotry in American political life
  - b. access to the feeling of having 'made it,' one could argue, comes from the collection of commodities that signal to others one's class status: cars, televisions, houses in 'safe' neighborhoods outside of the city. The trade-off, of course, is that these items are accessible through money — and wages are not equal across gender, ethnic and racial lines. Access to these commodities and communities was exclusive, and this exclusivity only reiterated the feeling of having made it (when you have something others do not have, you feel special)
  - c. coined by the man who made it a tradition of U.S. policy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 'military industrial complex' begins by dedicating the equivalent of billions of dollars to expanding the military's bureaucratic structure and its capabilities to purchase and invest in development of innovative war machinery; industrialized war, that is, becomes a public-private relationship that persists to this day whereby American taxpayers tacitly agree to pay private corporations money for military technology and weaponry. Men of draft age will now fight in the Cold War proxy wars in Korea followed by Vietnam
  - d. the white-picket fenced-in house in suburbia was not the only family-life model that was inaccessible to ethnic and racial minorities: the so-called 'nuclear family' (husband, wife, son, daughter) unit, which had been all but an impossibility prior to the 50s was not culturally or economically suitable for Black and Brown communities, where both parents often had to work and children were cared for by other community members, including some family members and some neighbors.



# INTELLECTUAL MARXISM BECOMES THE NORM

The reality of the postwar world disputed radical predictions and promoted disillusionment. The proletarian revolution would not likely take place, at least not for a long time; and younger rebels began to think of themselves, for want of another category, as intellectuals. Prodding, pulling conceptually at reality before them, they worked to arrive at such cultural, personal solutions as the absence of any revived radicalism would allow. At best, they hinted at civilization—the West, the way of life arrived at in place of a proletarian revolution—as a reality to be seen whole, a reality previously and abstractly designated as capitalism. At worst, they gave themselves over body and soul, through a series of ideological rationalizations, to the same system. A decade later, with the disintegration of the organized Left virtually complete and the faithful ethnic milieu in ripe middle age, intellectuals of various descriptions had become the constituency for radicalism.

—Paul Buhle, *Something Beyond Leninism*

"the difficulty of art was that it forced a man back on his life, and each time the task was more difficult and distasteful."

"So you come soon to power, but you have merely inherited the crisis and yours is the profit of cancer."

"What were the phenomena of the world today? If I knew little else, I knew the answer — war, and the preparations for new war." — Norman Mailer, *Barbary Shore*

# FEMINISM AND BLACK FEMINISM

- As the Party became more of an American radical and substantially middle class organization, its historic strictures against women's gender-conscious participation naturally eased. During the war, precisely at the moment when membership reached its peak, draft-age men had gone off to fight—cleaving women with an unprecedented opportunity for leadership, albeit at the middle and lower levels of the organization. Over half the local organizations had women at their head. Working women drawn back to the factories together with middle-class women active in housing, cultural and United Nations-style work exerted pressure for theoretical adjustment.
- Mary Inman, a West Coast Party journalist, offered the first notable challenge to orthodox ideas on the 'Woman Question' in a quarter of a century in 1940. Inman presented the subjugation of the housewife as the unpaid labor behind wage labor. Party thought, heavily economist, ran against this position, and it had so little support from career-minded progressive women then or later that it would not be put forth again until the 1970s.
- Eight years after Inman, Claudia Jones would publish "An end to the neglect of the problems of the Negro woman!" in which she writes: "The super-exploitation of the Negro woman worker is thus revealed not only in that she receives, as woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men, but in that the majority of Negro women get less than half the pay of white women. Little wonder, then, that in Negro communities the conditions of ghetto-living – low salaries, high rents, high prices, etc – virtually become an iron curtain hemming in the lives of Negro children and undermining their health and spirit! Little wonder that the maternity death rate for Negro women is triple that of white women! Little wonder that one out of every 10 Negro children born in the United States does not grow to manhood or womanhood! "







# IN THE ETHNIC LEFTIST CIRCLES

- Marxist ideas did not so much disappear as change subtly and, in the case of some venerable slogans, simply recede toward the margins. Contrary to subsequent anti-Communist claims, the ethnic activists espoused no cynical underlying attitude. They believed, or convinced themselves for a time, that in America Communism became democracy and that democracy would become Socialism in some peaceful postwar world order (which is what occurs in postwar northern Europe).
- While generations of Eastern European immigrants and their descendants had been the 'base' of Socialist power and belief in the U.S., by the 1940s, the Party's program no longer served, even if severely adapted.
- "Progressivism" of left New Dealers shifted into complacency when, as Truman ascends to the presidency, will use the legacy of Roosevelt to bolster the military budget and ship democracy across the world in imperial ventures. Rather than backing away from European style imperialism, America would fashion its own form of 'pro-democracy' imperialism "to ensure world peace." As one may guess, of course, this message of 'bringing American democracy abroad' is revealed to be hypocrisy by most of the Black and ethnic minorities' experiences.
- Most especially within the Black community of educated intellectuals, Trotskyist left communism would become the route to more respectable social status. (Contrast this with the activist-led Black power movement that in the community would be a route toward respectable social status in the coming decades).



# TROTSKYISM IN AMERICA

- Born into a wealthy Ukrainian-Jewish family, Trotsky was radicalized in his twenties by who would become his first wife, Aleksandra Sokolovskaya (while he had been an agrarian socialist he was opposed to Marxism before this). He printed revolutionary pamphlets and helped organized workers into the South Russian Workers' Union in what is now southern Ukraine. Members of the union, including Trotsky, were arrested two years later.
- While in prison, he read the work of Vladimir Lenin and ideologically aligned with the newly established Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. Because he had to wait in prison so long, he married Sokolovskaya while in prison in Moscow. The next year, he was sentenced to exile in Siberia, where he later escaped and moved to London to meet Lenin. It was upon escaping that he changed his name from Lev Bronstein to Leon Trotsky to avoid recapture abroad. It was during this time that he and Lenin most disagreed in their approach to a coming revolution in Imperial Russia.
- After participating in the attempted 1905 Revolution, Trotsky is again sentenced to Siberia and again escapes, this time going to Vienna. While in Vienna, Lenin and the Bolsheviks leave the RSDLP and form their own party, the RSDLP(b) which will later become the Communist Party. During the First World War, Trotsky worked in France in anti-war social democratic campaigns and was deported to Spain, who then deported him to the U.S. While in New York City, he wrote for the Jewish Daily Forward and other Yiddish publications as a Russian translator.

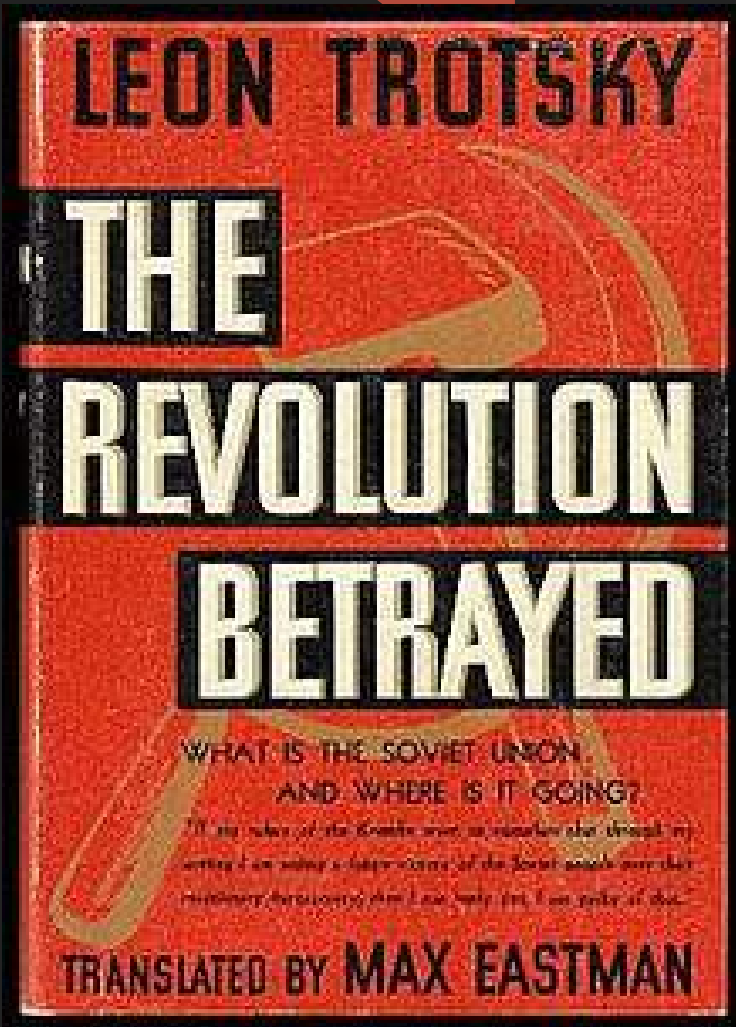
# TROTSKYISM IN AMERICA



- After the success of the 1917 revolutions, he rejoined Lenin in the USSR and became the Commissar of Foreign Affairs and later, more famously, the Commissar of the Red Army. He remained in this position until Lenin's death, when he was eventually expelled from the Communist Party for seeking to oppose the politburo run by Stalin in reference to the on-going Chinese Revolution.
- In absentia, he was sentenced to death after several of his close allies were put on the stand in a mock trial in Moscow in 1936 and testified to having colluded with Trotsky to plot the murder of Stalin. He spent the remainder of his life outside of Russia, finally settling in Mexico down the street from friends and fellow communists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. During this time, he wrote prolifically and organized constantly for leftist causes that were opposed to Stalin's regime. He was going to be asked to testify against communist in the U.S. before congress but planned to use the public ceremony to decry the suppression of American communists and so his visa was revoked.
- Stalinist agents were sent to Mexico to assassinate Trotsky several times, finally succeeding in 1940 when he died in a Mexico City hospital after he was stabbed in the head with an ice pick.



# TROTSKYISM IN AMERICA



- Trotsky's most famous theoretical contribution to Marxist theory was permanent revolution, or the idea that since capitalist world domination would not allow socialism to take hold in a single country without providing counterrevolutionary measures that revolution must be succeeded by others throughout the world. This was his answer to a country going from feudal-agrarian straight to socialism (like in the cases of Russia and, later, China) instead of going through a bourgeois-democratic revolution first.
- In opposition to the Third International (otherwise known as the Communist International or the Comintern), Trotsky and his allies founded the Fourth International as the International Left Opposition and then the International Communist League in Paris in 1938. Of crucial difference to the Stalinism of the Comintern, the ICL promoted proletarian internationalism.
- In his 1937 book *The Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky outlays most of his theoretical treatise against the Stalinist regime. He calls the USSR a degenerated workers' state, by which he means that it exists as the consequence of a dictatorship of the proletariat becoming ruled by a small clique of bureaucrats. As a degenerated workers' state, it was still better than a capitalist bourgeois state because it could still be restored to a democratic workers' state. As a Leninist, Trotsky firmly believed in the vanguard party's ability to lead the revolution and believed the USSR prior to Lenin's death was a democratic workers' state.

# TROTSKYISM IN AMERICA

- Trotskyists in the U.S. combined Bolshevism with the struggle for racial justice. The Trotskyists argue that until the white race acknowledges the oppression experienced by the Black race, there can be no coalition-building across racial and class lines. In fact, Trotsky himself supported the self-determination of Black Nationalism:

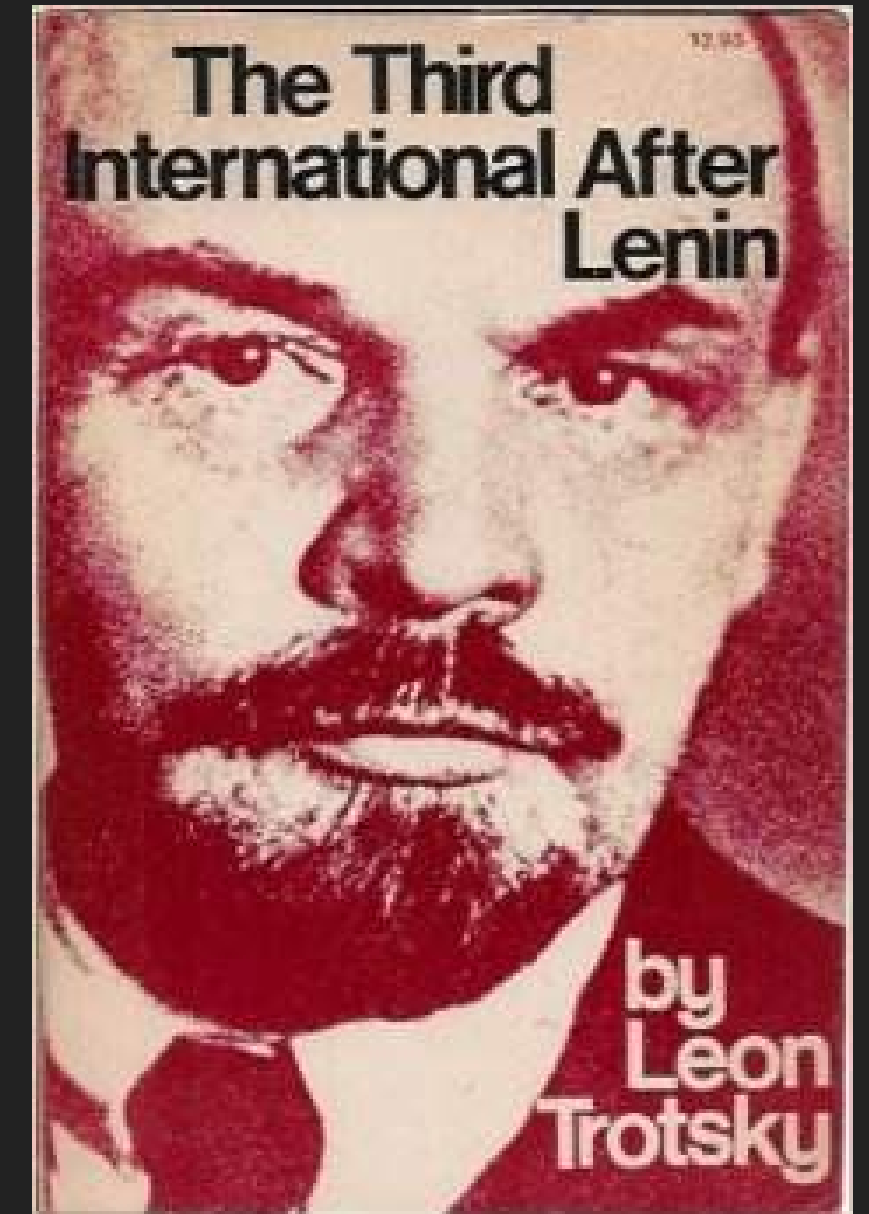
*Those American workers who say, "Blacks should separate if they so desire and we will defend them against our American police"--those are the revolutionists. I have confidence in them. The argument that the slogan for self-determination leads away from the class point of view is an adaptation to the ideology of white workers.*

- Trotsky wrote after meeting Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay, "the education of Negro propagandists is an exceedingly urgent and important revolutionary task at the present juncture." He later admitted that his ability to help this movement could only go so far: "What forms of organization are most suitable for the movement among American Negroes, it is difficult for me to say, as I am insufficiently informed regarding the concrete conditions and possibilities. But the forms of organisation will be found, as soon as there is sufficient will to action" (source: Christian Høgsbjerg, International Socialism #121)



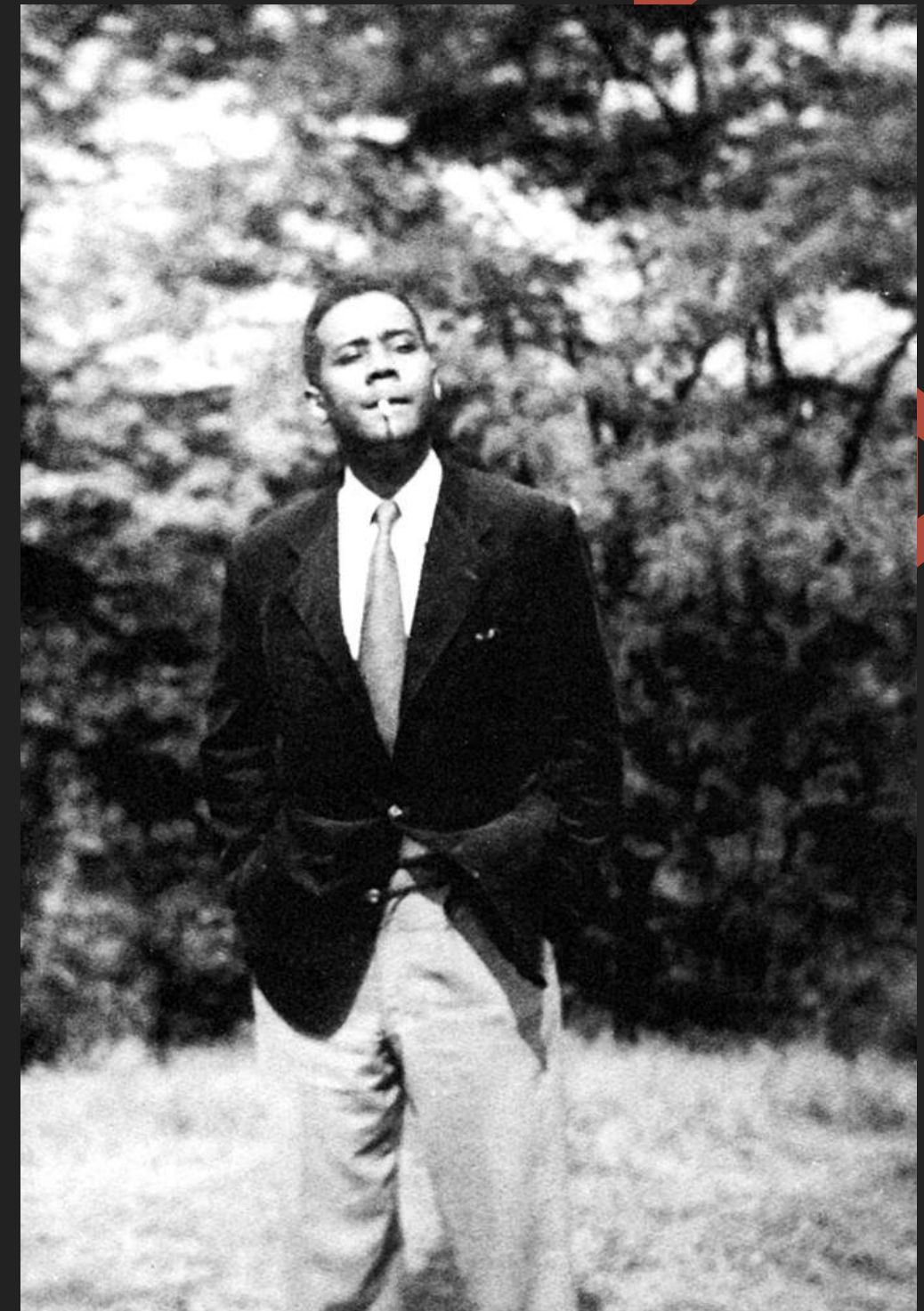
# TROTSKYISM IN AMERICA

- After 1927, Trotsky begins to use the dialectical materialist vision in a totally new way that will impact Western Marxist theory to this day. He uses the theory of '*uneven and combined development*,' which opposes 'stagist' view that in order to come to socialism a country must first develop under a bourgeois capitalist state.
- This theory instead proposes that since each nation and indeed each region is both qualitatively and quantitatively different, they will develop heterogeneously. In addition, these contexts exist in relation to a world economy that also impacts their development. Thus, there could be multiple 'stages' of economic and political development happening concurrently in the same country. This meant that, for Trotsky, the revolution was always going to be different in different contexts. Moreover, this fragmentary aspect of developing countries means that the socialist revolution is more likely to be successful, establishing democratic norms under working-class leadership. It is this uneven and combined development that is the context for using the tactic of permanent revolution.



# C.L.R. JAMES

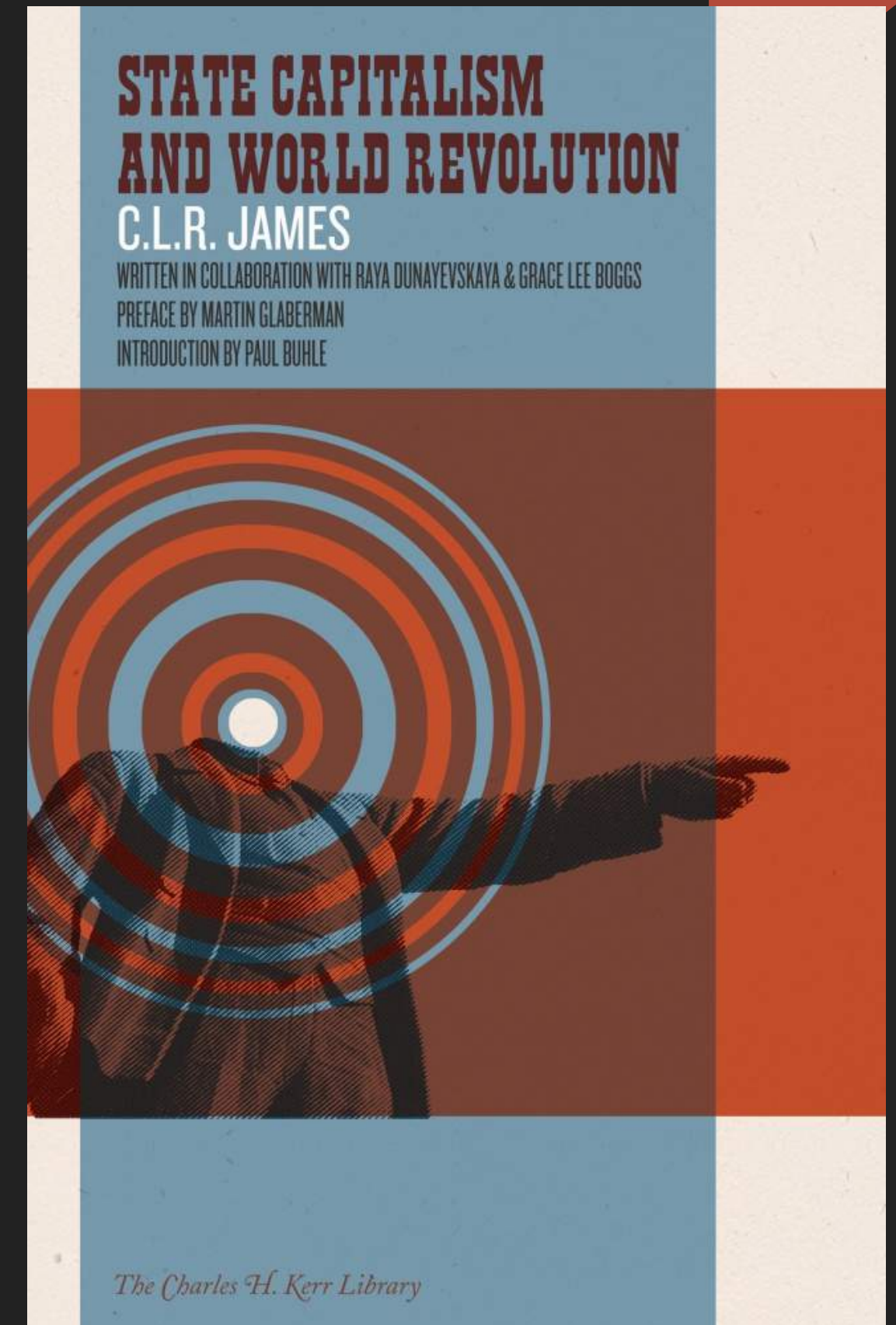
- Born and raised in Trinidad, James was a prolific radical and theorist from high school onward. He joined the Trotskyist movement in the U.K. after he moved there in the 1930s.
- In 1938, he went to Paris and helped to found the Fourth International with Trotsky and was elected to its Executive Committee. It was then that he moved to the U.S., where he joined the Socialist Workers Party in its leadership.
- After his split with the SWP, he joined the new Workers Party but after a couple years of it not doing much on racial justice and because he and his colleagues Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs disagreed with party leadership about the definition of the Soviet Union's state of affairs, they rejoined the SWP.
- In the early '50s, he was deported from the U.S. to the U.K.. After a few years reporting there on cricket, he returned to Trinidad to help the revolutionary movement there. At the end of the decade, though, he returned to the U.K., where he would spend the remainder of his life reporting on cricket and providing theorizing and organizing help to the nascent Black Power movement.



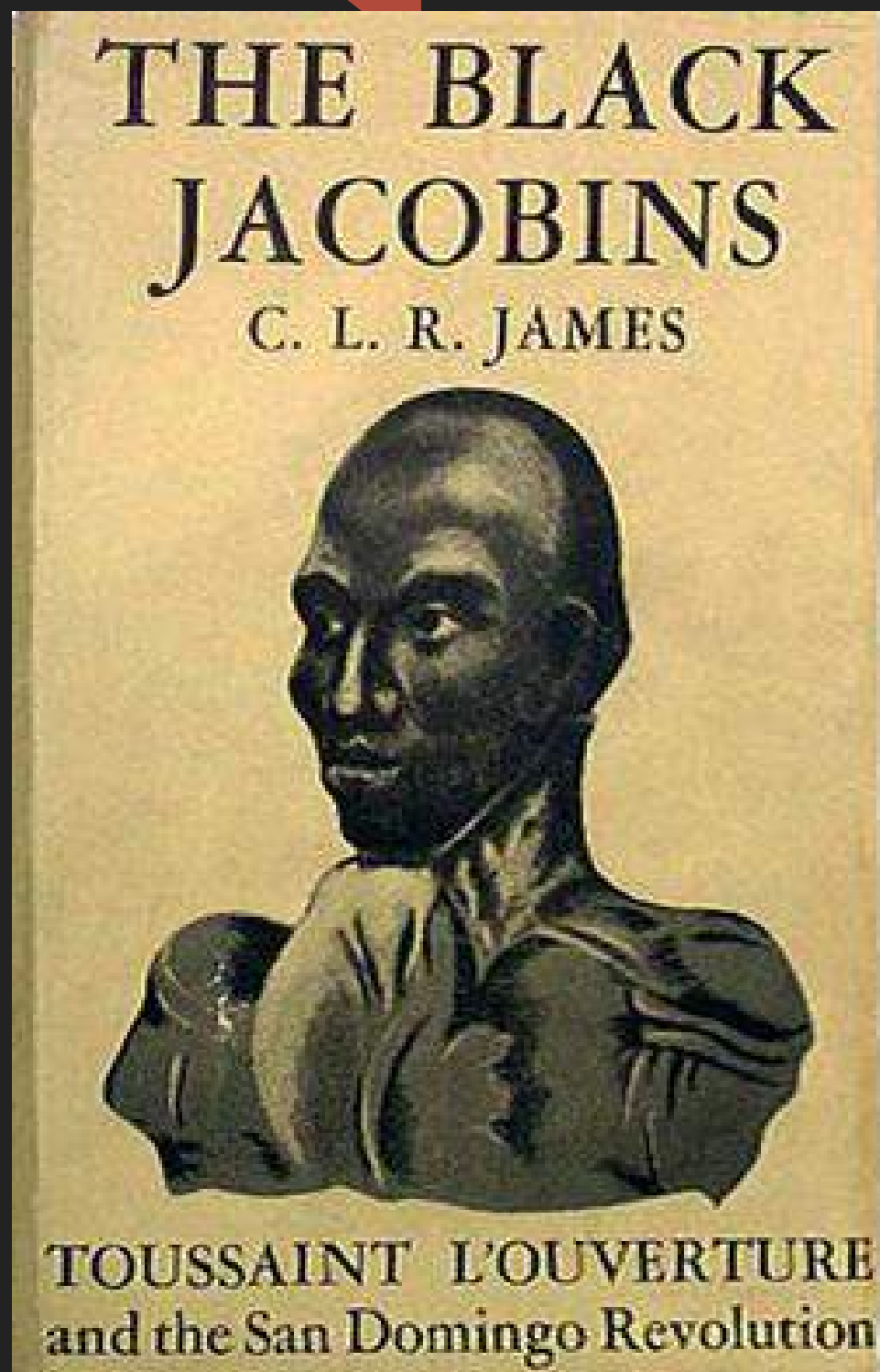


# C.L.R. JAMES

With his friend Raya Dunayevskaya and author Grace Lee Boggs, he developed the **Johnson-Forest Tendency** of Marxian thought, which argued that no socialist country had existed in the world as of the 1940s. Instead, they argued, what existed in the U.S.S.R. was a ***state capitalist*** regime – capitalism run by the state, where the means of production are run as state-owned firms (for profit). The tendency also argued that "...the African-American struggle, rather than being subsumed under the general struggle of the working class, had a powerful dynamic of its own and would be central to the socialist revolution in the U.S. [and] ... the American working class was far more radical, having a greater revolutionary character," meaning no longer was a vanguard party necessary. Dunayevskaya disagreed on this last point; she believed some organization of revolutionary-minded people needed to exist.



# C.L.R. JAMES



In his 1938 book, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, James offers a Marxist analysis of the Haitian revolution that centers Toussaint L'Ouverture as the promulgator of French Revolutionary ideals (liberty and equality). Unique to James's book was placing the Haitian revolution in historical context to the French Revolution and other European historical moments post-Enlightenment—prior to James's book, the revolution was seen as an isolated slave's rebellion that was later quashed by Napoleon Bonaparte. James argued, however, that it was the Haitians who were able to truly understand the ideals of the French Revolution, more even than the white European Frenchmen. By placing the Black Haitians at the center of the story, *The Black Jacobins* also becomes the first example of what we call today Subaltern Studies—the study of the oppressed minorities living under a powerful hegemony.



# C.L.R. JAMES

"Shortly after the founding of the SWP, C. L. R. James arrived from Britain to join its ranks. A brilliant West Indian intellectual, James was already author of two marxist classics: *Black Jacobins* and *World Revolution*. He became one of the foremost writers and orators among the U.S. Trotskyists, but he also made a distinctive theoretical contribution. Quickly absorbing essential aspects of the African American reality, and carrying on searching discussions with Trotsky, James formulated a pathbreaking approach to the Black liberation struggle and the issue of self-determination for Black Americans. In addition to stressing the traditional need to oppose all forms of racist discrimination against Blacks, James posited the centrality of the Black struggle to the U.S. class struggle, highlighted the importance of all-Black organizations and movements, and raised the idea that self-determination for African Americans—up to and including the creation of an independent nation, if that is what they chose—was an appropriate perspective for revolutionary Marxists. Not all SWPers accepted James's views (for example, the other influential Black Trotskyist, Ernest Rice McKinney, insisted on an integrationist approach that subordinated race to class), but these were ideas that altered the way many Marxists understood the intersection of race and class."

*Trotskyism in the United States : Historical Essays and Reconsiderations*  
by Paul Le Blanc, Alan Wald, and George Breitman

# C.L.R. JAMES

- **"The 14 or 15 million Negroes in the USA represent potentially the most militant section of the population. Economic exploitation and the crudest forms of racial discrimination make this radicalization inevitable.** We also have historical proof, first in the part played by the Negroes in the Civil War and in the response to a Marcus Garvey. Superficially, the Negro accepts, but that acceptance does not go very deep down. It is essentially dissimulation and a feeling of impotence, the age-old protective armor of the slave. It has been stated that the CP in organizing the Negroes in the South got such response that it had to check the campaign. The reason given was that owing to the number of Negroes joining and the fewness of the whites, the result would soon be a race-war between the Southern workers and sharecroppers." - C.L.R. James in "Preliminary Notes on the Negro Question" (1939)
- "I have been thinking over the Negro question... I have talked much with LT [Leon Trotsky], and have been thinking over all that he said. I am now certain that **no one in America, none in the party, has ever seen the Negro question for the gigantic thing it is, and will increasingly be.** LT sees it, I was groping towards it. I begin to see it now, every day more clearly." - C.L.R. James in a letter to his wife Constance Webb
- **"discrimination in restaurants should be fought by a campaign. A number of Negroes in any area go into a restaurant all together, ordering for instance some coffee, and refuse to come out until they are served.** It would be possible to sit there for a whole day in a very orderly manner and throw upon the police the necessity of removing these Negroes...Yes, and give it an even more militant character. There could be a picket line outside to attract attention and explain something of what is going on." - Trotsky in On Black Nationalism and Self-Determination (1972)

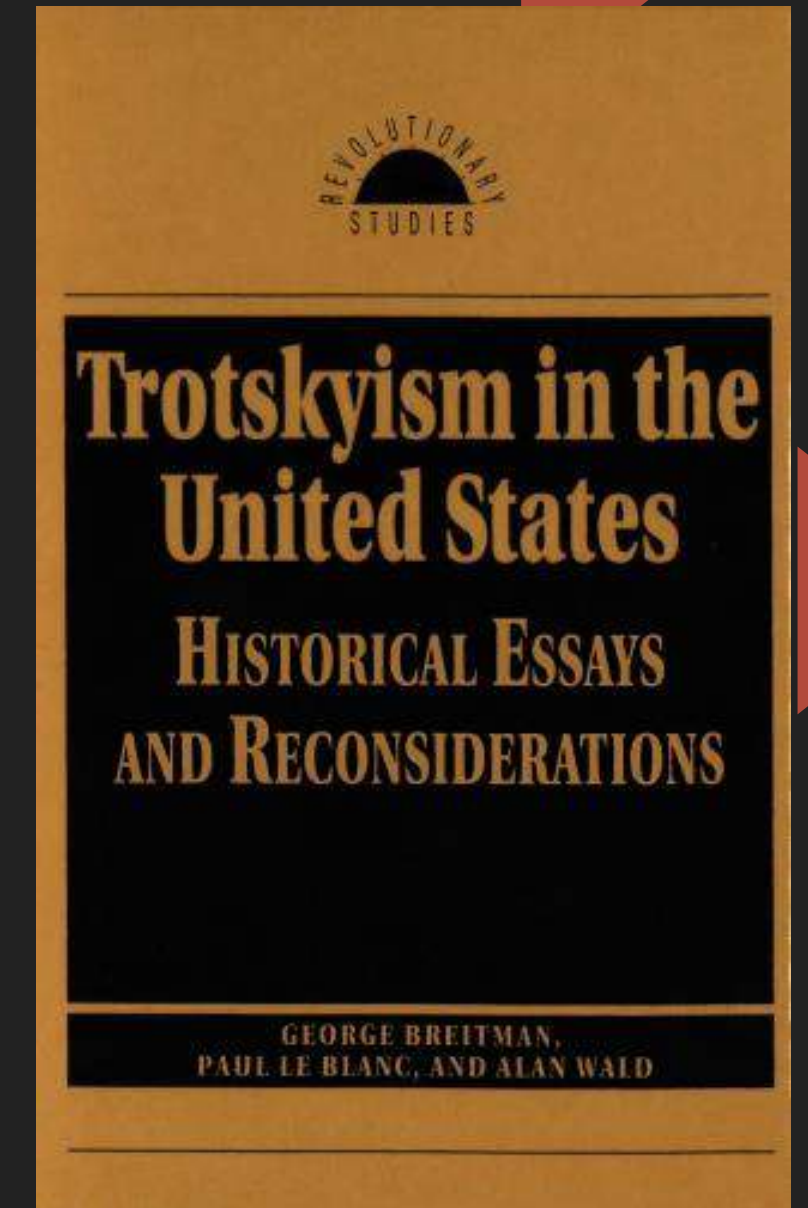


# C.L.R. JAMES

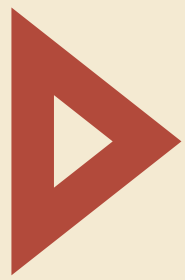
- "Sooner or later the organization will have to face its attitude towards capitalism. Is it to be a reformist or revolutionary organization? It will not start as a full-fledged revolutionary socialist organization. As Lenin pointed out to the pioneers of communism in Britain immediately after the war, it would be a mistake to flaunt the banner of revolution right at the beginning. **The basis of the organization must be the struggle for the day-to-day demands of the Negro. But the American economy is already and will increasingly pose the question to every political organization fascism or communism.** Here again the initial leadership will exercise a decisive influence. This is a question which will ultimately be decided by struggle within the organization."
- "Militant struggle for day-to-day demands must be the basis and constant activity of the movement, but in this period, action on this basis will drive the movement sharply up against the capitalist state and fascists or neo-fascist bands; and the transition to revolutionary socialism will not ultimately be difficult. As soon as this organization has achieved a firm basis, an international conference will most probably be called between the various militant Negro organizations and from my personal knowledge of them and their personnel, there is a probability that Socialism may be adopted. Such are the possibilities at the present time. And it is fortunate that they are so favorable. **But it must be insisted upon that support of a Negro mass movement must not be conditional upon whether it is or soon will be socialist or not. It is the awakening and bringing into political activity of the large mass of Negroes which is the main consideration,** and to this the party must give its frank, sincere, and unwavering support. "

# TROTSKYISM WINS

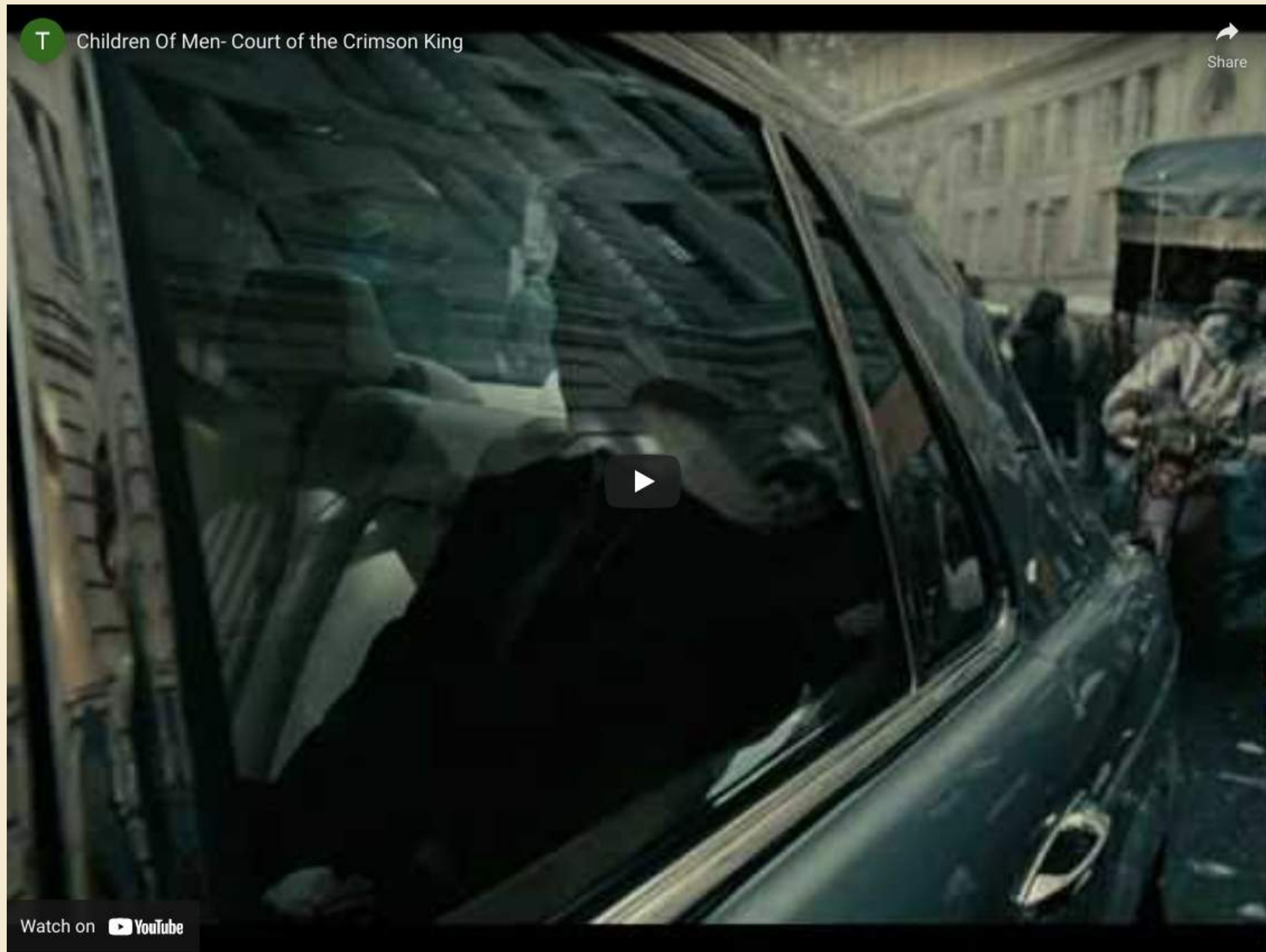
Nikita Khrushchev's devastating report confirming Stalin's crimes in the USSR. The effects of this report were to be felt for years to come. Several months later, masses of students and workers in Hungary rose up against the oppressive bureaucratic dictatorship there—only to be brutally crushed by Russian military might. Thousands of Communists experienced a bitter disillusionment, which made it impossible for them to remain in their party. The world Stalinist movement began a process of decomposition that could never be reversed. **The Trotskyist movement, in contrast, stood vindicated by its proud record of proletarian internationalism in the face of bureaucratic dictatorship. What's more, through Trotsky's The Revolution Betrayed and other works, it was possible to provide a clear revolutionary Marxist understanding of the difference between Bolshevik goals and Stalinist practice, and of how the latter had triumphed in the USSR...**“The radical movement as a whole lost virtually an entire generation of recruitment to the Cold War and witch-hunt,” Novack observed. “Relative to other currents, the SWP came out of that ordeal with the best morale, since world events had substantiated its basic ideas.” In the period of ferment and reevaluation of the late 1950s and early 1960s—when the SWP made special efforts to enter into dialogue and united-front efforts with many older and younger radicals—it was able to draw new recruits to its banner...Trotsky represented this kind of revolutionary socialism, or Marxism, particularly against influential reformist, Stalinist, and sectarian distortions.







# CHILDREN OF MEN



# NEXT CLASS...

## July 14 – The New Left and Decolonization



- Ch. 7 "The New Left" in *Marxism in the United States* by Paul Buhle
- Ch. 6 "The Third Creation of the World" from *Socialism Past and Future* by Michael Harrington
- Passages from the Huey P. Newton Reader
- Chapters from *Assata: An Autobiography* by Assata Shakur
- *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (Netflix) and *BlackKkKlansman*