

History 1000
Spring 2009
Prof. R. Oestreicher

Writing for Majors: History of the Twentieth Century American Left

Course Description:

The terms Left and Right date from the French Revolution. In the French National Assembly the most radical faction sat on the left side of the room, the more moderate factions on the right. Since the mid-nineteenth century, “the Left” usually refers to parties, movements, and ideas committed to radical, anti-capitalist reconstructions of society emphasizing economic and social equality. In many countries the success of mass left-wing parties gave the Left cultural and political visibility. In the U.S. left-wing parties have rarely had more than minimal electoral significance. Thus, one of the first questions our course must confront is what impact the Left has had on American culture and politics in the absence of a viable left-wing party.

In 1906 German sociologist Werner Sombart posed the problem in an essay entitled “Why is there No Socialism in the United States? (Warum gibt es keinen Socialismus in den Vereinigten Staaten?)”. Although some of Sombart’s premises were wrong (The Socialist Party, USA, although much smaller than the German Social Democratic Party matched the support of Socialist Parties in many other industrial societies at the time of his writing), in subsequent decades his question became a classic for scholars of American politics and culture. By the second quarter of the twentieth century the US appeared to be the only industrialized democracy without an electorally significant socialist or labor party. Many scholars labeled this apparent gap in the American political spectrum as American Exceptionalism, That framework often dominated scholarship on the American Left and on the political culture of American workers.

We will begin by subjecting this theory of American Exceptionalism to a critical appraisal. What are the assumptions behind that notion? Then we will focus on three eras during which the American Left created mass movements: ca1905-1919; the mid 1930s to the mid 40s; and the 1960s. In each case a key organization provided these movements with organizational focus: the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). We will ask a series of questions about each organization: what was its base of support? cultural roots? ideology? political practice? internal political conflicts? sources of decline? political and cultural impact?

This is a writing seminar. Both words will shape the class. Seminars should be sites of active learning. I will occasionally introduce topics with mini-lectures, but most of the time I will expect you to take charge, to bring the activist mentalite of the people we’re studying into the classroom. You will write about what you discover. I will offer a detailed critical appraisal, and then you will rewrite. By the end every student should both know something about the history of the American Left and see improvement in writing and communication skills.

Course Requirements and Grades:

1. Attend all classes, complete all reading assignments prior to class, and participate actively in class discussion.
2. Write three analytical essays using both primary and secondary sources (approx. 1250 to 2000 words each).
3. Thoroughly revise these papers in response to comments.
4. Grades:
 - 3 essays 15% @ = 45%
 - 2 revisions 15% @ = 30%
 - class participation = 25%

5. Plagiarism Policy: all work must be entirely your own. Plagiarism in any form will result in an F for the entire course.

6 Disability policy: "If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union (412) 624-7890 as early as possible in the term."

Required Books:

Socialist Party: Nick Salvatore, Eugene Debs, Citizen and Socialist

1930s: Michael Denning, The Cultural Front (an analysis of left-wing culture in the Popular Front era; sympathetic to the Left, but argues the CP should not be overemphasized)

New Left: James Miller, Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago

In addition: I recommend two background texts for the Communist Party and the 1930s-1940s:

Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself (quite critical of the CP but fair-minded)

Fraser Ottanelli. The Communist Party of the United States: From the depression to World War 11 (somewhat more sympathetic)

Klehr/Haynes is out of print. New copies of Ottanelli are quite expensive. If you wish to purchase them, you may be able to find inexpensive copies on line (see me for advice on web sources for used books). But you may not need to, since I will place these on reserve in Hillman.

I also strongly recommend a writing text: Revising Prose by Richard Lanham.

I will recommend many other books to fit your research topics and interests

American Left Ephemera Collection: One of your major sources for this class will be an on-line digital research library I have created in collaboration with University library staff. Log on and familiarize yourself with it:

<http://digital.library.pitt.edu/a/americanleft/>

Office Hours:

Monday and Wednesdays 2:00--2:45, 4:30-5:15

Other times by appointment

3910 Posvar Hall; 412-648-7469; e-mail: dick@pitt.edu

Tentative Schedule: We may vary the schedule slightly depending on the tempo of the class, spending more or less time on topics than suggested here.

Since this is a W class, nearly every class will analyze writing strategies and language use in the texts for that day as well as the other topics for the day.

Mon. Jan. 5: Course Introduction:

Syllabus

What is “the Left”?

Wed. Jan 7: How did early American history shape American political culture?

Colonialism

American Revolution

American Constitutional Structure

Reading: Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution (available in most college history texts and in almanacs and other reference books)

Mon. Jan 12: Introduction to Marxist socialism

Reading: Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto. Section 1: “Bourgeois and Proletarians” (Any edition will do. Bring a Xerox with you to class.); start reading Salvatore

Wed. Jan. 14: Popular reactions against the transition from small-scale to large-scale corporate capitalism

Reading: Salvatore: finish through p. 177

Additional Assignment: Submit one page prospectus for your first paper

Mon. Jan. 19 **HOLIDAY**

Wed. Jan. 21 Film: *Eugene Debs and the American Movement*.

Mon. Jan. 26: Organizational history of the Socialist Party, USA

Reading: Salvatore: chapters 7 & 8

Research and writing strategies

Wed. Jan. 28: repression and decline
Reading: finish Salvatore

Mon. Feb. 2: **First paper due.** Class discussion of papers.

Wed. Feb. 4: The Russian Revolution and the origins of American communism
Reading: Klehr & Haynes, Chapters 1 and 2 or Ottanelli, Introduction and ch. 1
Start reading Denning, introduction and Chapters 1-3

Mon. Feb. 9: Third Period
Reading: Klehr and Haynes. 59-77 or Ottanelli, ch. 2-3
Continue with Denning

Wed. Feb. 11: the Popular Front
Reading: Klehr and Haynes. 77-95 or Ottanelli, ch. 4-5
Finish Denning through p. 159; pay special attention to Denning pp. 4-50 which will be the starting point of class discussion

Mon. Feb. 16: Continue with the Popular Front: discuss Langston Hughes poem (hand out) and look at examples of Popular Front culture on American Left Ephemera website

Wed. Feb. 18: Film: Seeing Reds (a long film; will run past normal class time)

Mon. Feb. 23: Communists and the CIO
Reading: Ottanelli, ch.6

Wed. Feb. 25: Communists and race: see on-line sources at American Left Ephemera Collection

Mon. March 2: Antifascism, the Spanish Civil War, and World War 2
Reading: Ottanelli, ch. 7, 8

Wed. March 4 Repression and Collapse of the CP: McCarthyism and Krushchev's 1956 speech on the "crimes of the Stalin Era"

SPRING BREAK

Mon. March 16: Fifties culture as the backdrop for the New Left: suburbanization, anticommunism, and cultural repression
Reading: begin Miller: Democracy is in the Streets; continue reading Miller throughout this section of the course
SECOND PAPER DUE

Wed. March 18: Cultural roots of the New Left—Rock'n Roll and the Beats

Mon. March 23—Intellectual roots: C. Wright Mills; unorthodox Marxism; anarchism; Marcuse

Wed. March 25: SDS and the Port Huron statement (see Miller's discussion of the Port Huron Statement esp. 119-125); the original document is available on line at <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>) ; read also Untitled poem by Charlie Cobb (handout)

Mon. March 30: civil rights and the Vietnam War

Wed. April 1: the counterculture—drugs, sex, rock'n roll, and politics

Mon. April 6: the New Left and the counterculture as global phenomena

Wed. April 8: Film: The War at Home (another long film)

Mon. April 13: coming apart—the collapse of the New Left

Wed. April 15: legacies? The Left today.

FINAL PAPERS DUE: TUES. APRIL 21, 4 P.M.