

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
Professor E. Foner
Spring 2012
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
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History W3528x

THE AMERICAN RADICAL TRADITION

"What is possible would never have been achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible." Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 1918

From the beginning of our history, radicalism has been a persistent feature of American society. This course will trace the evolution of American radicalism from the era of the Revolution to the present, focusing on the most influential individuals and social movements and exploring their goals and strategies, their successes and failures. Although often castigated as foreign-inspired enemies of American institutions, radicals have always sprung from and spoken the language of their culture, and appealed to some of its deepest values -- facts that help to explain radicalism's survival even in the face of tenacious opposition. Many radical movements have accepted the society's prevailing emphasis on the ideal of the free individual (often linked with ownership of property as the guarantor of personal autonomy) and have sought to eliminate obstacles to its fulfillment or extend it to excluded groups such as enslaved African-Americans or disenfranchised women. Other movements, based on a collectivist outlook, have rejected individualism and private property as obstacles to genuine freedom, but these too have derived much of their political vocabulary from the ideals of the American Revolution, with its promise of equality and personal fulfillment. Despite occasional resort to violence, most radical movements have reflected the democratic ethos of American life -- they have been open rather than secretive, and have relied on education, example, or "moral suasion," rather than coercion, as the means of achieving their goals.

From Tom Paine's ideal of an America freed from the hereditary inequalities of Europe, to the vision of liberation from legal and customary bondage espoused by abolitionists and feminists, the Knights of Labor's idea of a cooperative commonwealth, socialists' call for workers to organize society in accord with their own aspirations, the New Left's enunciation of personal liberation as a goal as worthy as material abundance, and current efforts to counteract the less appealing consequences of globalization, each generation of American radicals has made its distinctive contribution to an ongoing radical tradition.

Required Readings: All the readings below are required, and all are available in paperback. The list of readings has been given to the Book Culture Bookstore, on 112th Street. The readings include selections from the writings of American radicals, scholarly accounts, and memoirs. All readings are also on reserve in Butler Library.

For biographical information on leading American radicals, students should consult Paul Buhle and Harvey Kaye, ed., The American Radical. Other useful reference works include Paul Buhle, Dan Georgakis, and Mari Jo Buhle, Encyclopedia of the American Left, and Paul Buhle and Edmund Sullivan, Images of American Radicalism. The course assumes some basic knowledge of American history. Students who feel they lack this are advised to consult a U. S. history textbook for background.

Paper: Each student will write a paper of about ten pages, analyzing a work by an American radical. The paper is due at the discussion sections during Week 14. See the list of suggested books on the Courseworks website.

Sections: In addition to the lectures, undergraduate students are required to attend a weekly discussion section, directed by a graduate teaching assistant. The list of section hours and assignments will be arranged during the second week of classes. Failure to attend the sections regularly will have an adverse impact on your grade!

Graduate students are welcome to register for R credit, but not for E credit.

NB: The use of laptops is not permitted in this class except with the permission of the instructor.

Course Outline and Weekly Assignments:

Week 1 (Jan. 18): Introduction

Week 2 (Jan. 23, 25): Origins of American Radicalism

Eric Foner, Tom Paine and Revolutionary America, chs. 1-4

Timothy McCarthy and John McMillian, The Radical Reader, 33-37, 41-43, 69-72

Week 3 (Jan 30, Feb. 1): The Crusade Against Slavery

James B. Stewart, Holy Warriors, Preface, plus chs. 1-6

McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 25-28, 79-83, 114-20, 151-59

Week 4 (Feb. 6, 8): The Origins of Feminism and the Crisis of Reconstruction

Ellen C. DuBois, Feminism and Suffrage, Intro, plus chs. 1-3

Stephen Tuck, We Ain't What We Ought to Be, ch. 2

McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 165-75, 185-87

Week 5 (Feb. 13, 15): Early Working Class Radicalism

Michael Kazin, American Dreamers, ch. 3

McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 63-65, 98-102, 217-22, 227-45

Week 6 (Feb. 20, 22): American Populism

Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Moment, Intro, plus chs. 2-6

McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 98-102, 250-56, 264-68

Week 7 (Feb. 27, 29): American Socialism

Kazin, American Dreamers, ch. 4

McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader. 281-87, 300-03, 314-19

Week 8 (March 5, 7): Midterm

No readings or discussion sections this week. Class meets March 5

Midterm examination: Wednesday March 7

Week 9 (March 19, 21): The Birth of Modern Feminism

Nancy Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism, Intro, plus chs. 1-2, 4
McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 103-07, 211-12, 289-95, 310-13

Week 10 (March 26, 28): Black Radicalism in the Early Twentieth Century

Tuck, We Ain't What We Ought to Be, chs. 3-5
McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 329-39

Week 11 (April 2, 4): The "Old Left"

Dorothy Ray Healey and Maurice Isserman, California Red, Intro, plus chs. 1-4
Kazin, American Dreamers, ch. 5
McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 320-26

Week 12 (April 9, 11): The Civil Rights Revolution

John Dittmer, Local People, chs. 6-11
McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 349-78

Week 13 (April 16, 18): New Lefts

Kazin, American Dreamers, ch. 6
Tuck, We Ain't What We Ought to Be, chs. 9-10
McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 382-99, 468-76, 483-88

Week 14 (April 23, 25): New Kinds of Radicalism

Kazin, American Dreamers, ch. 7
Christine Stansell, The Feminist Promise, chs. 8, 10
McCarthy and McMillian, Radical Reader, 433-44, 503-06, 568-72, 577-83,
636-42

Week 15 (April 30): Looking Forward

No readings; class meets April 30