Political Radicalism in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century United States
Geoffrey Pollick

Course Outline

Course Description

What does it mean to be a radical activist? Who should be considered a radical? Is America a nation of conservative consensus, constantly perturbed by a left-wing fringe? Do socialists really want to take over the federal government, and is Fred Phelps simply a crazed religious preacher? This course raises such questions as it seeks to uncover the significance of radicalism in U.S. politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Exploring a range of definitions and uses of the term, students are asked to examine critically the relation between “radicalism” and political activism. In what ways has radicalism intersected with mainstream society in the United States? Have strident forms of dissent played a special role in U.S. democratic traditions? Through examination of primary documents and scholarly interpretations, we will inquire into these topics. Major themes addressed in the course include: labor activism, the women’s movement, anti-radical repression, genealogies of socialism and communism, religious radicalism, civil rights activism, and ethnic and immigrant expressions of political radicalism.

The course unfolds chronologically, beginning with reflections on the theoretical backgrounds for interpreting radicalism, and identifying specifically American forms of radical political participation. Each weekly unit then proceeds through the sweep of two centuries of the U.S. past, using a thematic focus to delve into the particular concerns of each various moment. Daniel Pope’s edited volume, American Radicalism, serves as a guide to the course, pairing essays by historians with primary documents, arranged both thematically and chronologically. Other primary and secondary readings supplement these selections and allow students—especially history majors—to gain a deep familiarity with a range of historiographical foci and concerns.
**Course Goals & Outcomes**

By taking this course, students have the opportunity to develop and enhance:

- skills in critical analysis of primary and secondary texts through interaction with literary, visual, and aural documents;
- ability to express complex ideas through composition of thoughtful prose that presents critical interpretation of historical data and theoretical concepts;
- and facility with oral presentation of key ideas before a group of peers.

**Required Texts**


N.B. While I envision assigning the texts indicated above, several books forthcoming in fall 2011 hold significant potential for augmenting the reading list. In particular, the three following books would likely be added to the course if available by late autumn, and if the course were scheduled for spring 2012:

Robin Blackburn, *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (Verso, 2011);

Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Beacon, 2011);


**Course Requirements**

Students will be asked to submit the following assignments:

- Three short essays, two to four pages in length, analyzing a primary document of the student’s from one of the assigned readings, due at regular intervals throughout the term. These essays allow students to practice critical reading and interpretation of historical documents;

- Participation in a small-group presentation of ten to fifteen minutes, introducing the main secondary reading for one class session, offering a critical historiographical assessment of the text in relation to the primary documents assigned for the day and to key concepts from course discussions. As part of this assignment, students will individually write and submit a three- to five-page analysis of one of the supplemental texts listed in the syllabus. Students may choose to write about any of the supplemental texts up to the date of the presentation. This assignment emphasizes a critical approach to secondary material, asking students to summarize and criticize arguments made by scholars;

- A research paper, ten to twelve pages in length, exploring the background and significance of a figure or movement from the history of U.S. political radicalism, due at the end of term. This assignment combines the skills of documentary analysis and interaction with secondary literature, asking students to synthesize their own interpretation of the past.

Further guidelines will be distributed for all assignments in order to clarify goals and expectations.
Outline of Topics and Proposed Readings

The readings and topics outlined below comprise an initial portrait of themes and perspectives to be addressed. Author surnames in boldface type indicate readings from required textbooks. Texts listed as supplemental will be used selectively in addition to the main reader (Pope), and to provide optional further reading for interested students. If the course is open only to undergraduates, I may choose to copy selections from the supplemental texts in order to build a course packet, rather than listing the full books on the course syllabus.

Week One: Course Introduction / Backgrounds Part I

- Syllabus review
- How should we define “radicalism”? Who are “radicals”? What is American radicalism, and is there anything American about radicalism?
- Interpreting radicalism in early America: Staughton Lynd v. Bernard Bailyn

Week Two: Backgrounds Part II

- Radical ideologies: Left and Right
- Radical inheritances from the Revolution
- Pope, Chapter 1, “Riot and Radicalism in the American Revolution,” pp. 15–49.

Week Three: The Woman’s Movement and the Transformation of American Society

Themes: Antebellum origins of the woman’s movement; Links to—and tensions with—other forms of activism (abolition, temperance, sabbatarianism); Main policy initiatives; Differences with Frederick Douglass/abolitionists in Civil War & Reconstruction decades; Late-nineteenth-century developments.


Week Four: Anti-Slavery Activism and the Civil War

Themes: Abolitionism and the Civil War; John Brown and radical tactics; Geographic national expansion and national identity; Reinforcement of sectional divisions; Proslavery activism.

- Supplemental:
Week Five: Reform or Revolution? Progressives, Populists, and Revolutionaries
Themes: Genealogies of radicalism (liberalism, socialism, syndicalism, anarchism, populism); Immigrant and ethnic radicalism; Socialist party formation; Progressivism and liberal reform in relation to radical and revolutionary politics; The complication of evangelical radicalism.

- **Supplemental:**
  - Tom Goyens, Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York, 1880–1914 (University of Illinois, 2001);

Week Six: Anarchists, Bohemians, Wobblies, and Conscientious Objectors
Themes: Labor in the 1870s and 1880s, up to rise of I.W.W.; West Virginia/Colorado labor wars; Greenwich Village and radicalism in bohemia; ACLU origins in WWI conscientious objection/American Union Against Militarism.

- **Supplemental:**
  - Paul Avrich, Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background (Princeton, 1991);

Week Seven: Repressing Radicalism
Themes: Espionage and Sedition Acts; Red Scare as prologue to 1920s; Radicalism of opposition.

- **Supplemental:**
Week Eight: Labor and the Old Left
Themes: Increasing influence of labor unions; labor and the formation of American Communism; American Communism in the 1920s and 1930s; Documentary film, Michael Goldman’s *At Home in Utopia* (New York City-based housing collectives founded by Jewish communists in the 1920s and 1930s)

- **Supplemental:**

Week Nine: Cold War Anti-Communism
Themes: Radical anti-Communism; MacCarthy/HUAC hearings; Hollywood blacklisting; Popular attitudes and political rhetoric.

- **Williams**, Chapters 2 & 3, pp. 33–68
- **Supplemental:**

Week Ten: Civil Rights Radicalism
Themes: Malcolm X (Alex Haley autobiography and Manning Marable’s new biography); Martin Luther King, Jr., SNCC, and nonviolence; Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MeCHA), “El Plan de Santa Barbara” (1968); Race, sexuality, and politics in the writings of Bayard Rustin.

- **Supplemental:**

Week Eleven: New Left / Countercultural Activism
Themes: Antiwar / Antinuclear movements; Student activism / 1968 (Kent State, Columbia); Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*; Youth culture.

• Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, “Historicizing the American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s,” in Braunstein and Doyle, eds., Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ’70s, 5–14 (Routledge, 2002).
• Timothy Miller, “The Sixties-Era Communes,” in Braunstein and Doyle, eds., Imagine Nation, 327–352.

**Supplemental:**
- Jeremy Varon, Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies (University of California, 2004).

**Week Twelve: The Rise of the New (Christian) Right**
Themes: The conservative political resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s

- Rise of the “culture wars”

**Supplemental:**

**Week Thirteen: Dreams of the ’90s**
Themes: AIDS activism / Gay Rights (Roots in Mattachine Society; ACT UP and AIDS); World Trade Organization protests in Seattle; Environmental activism.


**Supplemental:**
- Janet Thomas, The Battle in Seattle: The Story Behind and Beyond the WTO Demonstrations (Fulcrum, 2000).

**Week Fourteen: The Rise of the Tea Party and New Labor Debates in Wisconsin**
- Selections from Lepore, The Whites of Their Eyes

**Supplemental:**