

Issue

Brief

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An Intellectual History of Modern Leftist Politics in the US

Aarnav Chaturvedi

Abstract

Left-wing activism amongst young people in the United States is on the rise, in no small part aided by the internet and social media. The generation which demographic researchers refer to as 'Gen-Z'—or those born between the mid- to late 1990s to the early 2010s—is becoming more politically engaged. This brief offers an intellectual history of modern-day leftist politics in the US, and argues that it is primarily driven by the pursuit of economic and social justice. This is expressed in a number of discourses, such as the demand for universal healthcare, and the political empowerment of marginalised groups such as refugees, African-Americans, and the LGBTQ community.

Introduction: From Feudalism to the Industrial Revolution

Before the advent of modern democracy, monarchs ruled over all land and people in western European society, and the subjects had no rights nor liberty. This system was called feudalism,¹ where the nobility and the clergy held sway over the peasants, merchants, and others of low classes. The landowners (fiefs) were the only class allowed to benefit from the labour of the masses (serfs). There was a strict hierarchical divide between aristocrats—who controlled land—and the peasants who lived on that land and cultivated it for the aristocrat. There was massive economic inequality between the masses and the aristocratic minority.

In the 14th century, a new movement began to take shape, which sought to challenge the social order. The Renaissance started as a revolt against the dogmatism of the Catholic Church, which sought control over the arts and sciences and used them as religious tools. The Renaissance saw a revival of humanism, which emphasised human life as the most fundamental value above all social and religious institutions.² The spread of the printing press in Europe in the mid-15th century allowed for the circulation of written literature, which in turn led to advances in political and scientific thought. This would pave the way for the development of the ‘scientific method’, the Protestant revolution, and the reformation of the Catholic Church.

This period was also characterised by the colonisation by European powers of the American continent. Some European imperial powers such as Portugal and Spain started buying slaves from Africa to work on plantations in the new colonies. These changes destabilised the European social structure. Due to the increasing importance of trade, the merchant class in Europe gained political power. The feudal hierarchy began to fall apart, and around 1685, the Age of Enlightenment would begin. This era gets its name from its emphasis on rationalism, science, and logic. It saw the end of feudalism and the rise of nation-states. Philosophers like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau proclaimed that the individual was paramount. The notion of human rights became popular, as did the idea that nations, rulers, and monarchs should guarantee human rights and those governments that violated these rights were illegitimate.³ Further, Adam Smith proclaimed that ‘the Wealth of Nations’ was built on free trade, calling it the source of Europe’s economic prosperity.⁴

Introduction: From Feudalism to the Industrial Revolution

Monarchic power was diluted in all European societies. Britain adopted direct democracy in the form of a Parliament. The ideas of the Enlightenment were further crystallised with the American and French revolutions. With the invention of the cotton gin and the steam engine, this period also saw the beginning of the industrial revolution and the shift of a large section of the workforce from farming to industry.

It was during the early stages of the French Revolution in the late 18th century that the political terms “left” and “right” were coined. As the newly formed national assembly debated how much authority the king should retain, the progressive, anti-monarchy faction sat to the left of the presiding officer, while the conservative supporters of the monarchy sat to the right. Over time, the terms ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ became synonymous with ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’, respectively. Generally, left-wing politics tends to challenge social norms and hierarchies, while right-wing politics advocates for those social hierarchies. The rise of industrial society and the Age of Enlightenment did see economic and political power move away from the monarchs. Even so, power remained concentrated in the hands of a few. Britain and the US had democracy, but voting was limited to a small number of “white” landowning aristocratic men.⁵ The ‘wealth of nations’ was increasing, but that wealth remained with a small percentage of the population, while many starved,^{6,7} their children dying within a year of birth.⁸ Most of those that did survive started working in assembly lines, some from the age of three.⁹

There was also the transatlantic slave trade, which ripped over 30 million Africans from their homes, sold them as property and made them labour without any payment till their death. Families in slavery had no means of saving themselves or their descendants from that fate.¹⁰ The slave trade was the second stage of a triangular trade in which arms, textiles, and wine were shipped from Europe to Africa, enslaved people from Africa to the Americas, and sugar and coffee from the Americas to Europe. At the US’s inception in 1776, all 13 of its colonies used slave labour. In the northern states, they worked as house servants, artisans, and labourers. The southern states developed an agricultural economy dependent on slave labour. Slavery was so pivotal to the southern states that during the founding of the Union, slaves were considered by the US Constitution to count as three-fifths of a ‘person’ in terms of electoral college-representation, increasing the political power of the southern states without giving slaves any political franchise. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, demand for slaves in the southern states skyrocketed, and slavery became a polarising issue between the Northern and Southern states, eventually leading to the American civil war.

Many criticised this system as inhuman and unjust, amongst them, Karl Marx. Marx (1818-1883) was a German-born philosopher best known for his critique of capitalism and advocacy of communism. The following paragraphs discuss some of Marx's most prominent ideas.

Commodity Production and the Labour Theory of Value

Marx defined a 'commodity' as 'an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind.'¹¹ He argued that commodities had two different types of 'value' – 'use value' (the utility provided by the commodity on its consumption) and 'exchange value' (the rate at which the commodity could be exchanged for other commodities). Since the exchange value of commodities is a relationship constantly in flux, there must be a characteristic which determines the exchange value. Marx argued that it was human labour: Labour was the process by which humans transformed the fundamental state of nature and used it to produce commodities; thus, all commodities derived their value from the labour that went into them.

Marx went on to use this concept to compare two different economic models. The Commodity-Money-Commodity (CMC) model was one where commodities were produced, then sold, and the money was exchanged for another commodity. Money acted as an intermediary for commodities in a CMC system, and the economy was arranged to maximise use value since people only purchased the commodities necessary to fulfil their desires. However, modern capitalist society is organised in a Money-Commodity-Money (MCM) manner. In this system, money (capital) is used to produce commodities, which are then sold in exchange for more capital than was invested. The difference between the two is the surplus-value, which is generated by labour and appropriated by the capitalists. The capitalist system is designed to maximise *exchange* value, not *use* value. The only reason to produce a commodity is to exchange it for more value than initially owned.

Thus, the system continues to produce commodities with no consideration of their utility, and with the sole goal of generating more capital—this entire ethos pushes the population into rampant consumerism. In his *Communist Manifesto*, Marx pointed out how capitalism had been highly effective at tearing down all previous social and cultural institutions—the church, the state, families, and guilds had all been stripped down to maximise free trade and wealth accumulation.

As an extension of this, it can be argued that the industrial revolution led to many consequences whose ramifications are being felt today: the destruction of the natural environment; climate change, which threatens the future of human existence; and the continuing primacy of the desire for capital accumulation.

Worker Alienation and Exploitation

Since capitalist society is arranged such that the possession of money (capital) allows a person to create commodities for a surplus-value, those who do not own capital (which is the overwhelming majority in most societies) have only one commodity to sell – their labour. Further, since people need commodities like food and shelter to survive, they have no choice but to sell their labour. Thus capitalists (the bourgeoisie) can buy and utilise workers' (proletariat) labour to generate surplus value and become richer. The capitalists, to maximise profits, tend to pay lower and lower wages. As a result, wealth in a capitalist society tends to get concentrated in the hands of even fewer people.

Marxist scholars today could say the philosopher got certain fundamental notions right. In 1900, in Britain and France, the top 1 percent of society owned 50 percent of its wealth, and the top 10 percent almost 90 percent of it.¹² Even today, 1 percent of the wealthiest people own as much wealth as the rest of the Earth's population.¹³ The buying power of members of the proletariat continues to diminish, to the point where they are unable to provide for their basic needs and are entirely dependent on the wages they get from the bourgeoisie, while the latter continue to use their labour to maximise profit. Further, since they are part of an assembly line, they do not retain ownership of the commodities they produce, which leads to a feeling of alienation and detachment from their labour.

This critique should particularly resonate with the millennials and Gen-Z of the United States, who face an increasingly competitive job market, have to work unpaid internships, and maintain high grade point averages (GPA) just so they can have some chance of getting a job and paying off the massive student debt they had accumulated. Though 150 years have passed since Marx theorised about the labour theory of value and worker alienation, the wealthy continue getting tax cuts, banks continue being deregulated, and labour unions continue being suppressed.

Historical Materialism and Class Struggle

One of Marx's most important ideas was that of 'historical materialism', which essentially posits that in all societies, the base of all culture is its economic modes of production (land, labour, capital) and their relation with the society's laws and political arrangements. He adds that all ideas of religious and moral values of society are 'superstructures' built on that base. This means that ideas like national unity and religious devotion, all serve to preserve production relations.¹⁴ This idea was essential to the development of the Marxist view of history.

It became the basis of much of sociology as well, which analyses the relationship between economics and societies. Marx argued that the capitalist system uses cultural ideas like religion to keep the proletariat subdued, that religion was the opiate of the masses. Many might agree with this statement without truly understanding its implications. Individuals who declare themselves as 'secular' might call out the political influence of Christianity or Islam, and then watch the new Marvel movie, wear their Jordan 1 shoes, and go on Instagram to repost the next Fox News or *New York Times* story or rave about 'Squid Games'—all the while, without realising that they are consuming 'opium', too; though not the religious kind fed to the masses in the 19th century.

However, Marx also argued that capitalism, with its erosive power, is in a constant state of crisis. Capitalists continue trying to drive down costs to compete with one another, thus paying lower wages to the worker, which in turn reduces the proletariat's ability to buy commodities. He predicted that eventually, since there is no longer a demand for commodities, the bourgeoisie, unable to profit, will stop production and, by extension, stop paying the proletariat. At this point, workers of the world would unite and attempt to break their chains. The bourgeoisie will fight back, use the mechanisms of the state, culture, and religion to curb the revolutionary zeal of the proletariat.

Left-wing activists have since used this theory to analyse political relationships and arguments in the modern world. When politicians advocate a policy, when corporations put out a "woke" ad campaign, it is important to look at who materially benefits and whether these are intended to improve the material conditions of people, or whether they are trying to use culture to reinforce the existing skewed distribution of wealth and power in society. Thus, in politics, the left side became the wing of the proletariat, trying to push for, and expand the political power of workers, be it through unionisation, student activism, academic investigation, or revolutionary effort.

E.P. Thompson and Post-Modernity

Marx's ideas found immediate appeal among all sections of society, from academics to global leaders, especially in the United States. Americans might be surprised to learn that one of Marx's biggest admirers was Abraham Lincoln, who even corresponded with him.¹⁵ Indeed, the Republican Party—considered the more right-wing of the two main parties in the US today—was founded by a Marxist named Alvin Bovay.¹⁶ (Again, like Lincoln, Marx was an avid abolitionist.¹⁷) Lincoln's first State of the Union address in 1861 was not about the efficiency of the free market or the US's 'manifest destiny', but included an 800-word rant on "Capital Versus Labour", in which he said, "Labour is prior to and independent of Capital. Capital is only the fruit of labour, and could never have existed if labour had not first existed. Labour is the superior of capital, and deserves much higher consideration."

Thus, the Marxist tradition is native to the US and has had a far more significant role in the development of America as a nation. Marx also predicted how the world would evolve. In particular, he believed that the 'global proletariat' would realise its collective oppression, leading to a revolution and the overthrow of all national governments and the establishment of a classless, stateless communist society, where all means of production would be socially owned, with free access to them for all.¹⁸ He wrote: "In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic."¹⁹

Friedrich Engels, co-author of the *Communist Manifesto*, even predicted the First World War (1914-18) with incredible accuracy.²⁰ In an 1888 letter, he wrote that no war was possible with Germany except a world war, declaring it would be, "The devastations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three or four years, and spread over the whole Continent; famine, pestilence, general demoralisation both of the armies and of the mass of the people produced by acute distress; hopeless confusion of our artificial machinery in trade, industry and credit." As is well known, the first communist revolution, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, took place in 1917, when the war was raging.

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However, Marx was mistaken with his principal prediction—that there will be a proletarian revolution in the West. Further, the communist government set up in the USSR after the revolution became increasingly imperialistic and totalitarian. These two factors led to the rise of a new sect of the left, quite literally called the ‘New Left’, which sought to redefine left-wing politics away from the authoritarianism that had overtaken Western communist parties. It characterised itself by its opposition to nuclear armament and war, and its support for socialism, social justice, and democracy. In the US, the New Left was driven mainly by university activism, by the likes of activists like Tom Hayden and intellectuals like Noam Chomsky. The movements in the US and Europe were different, primarily due to the civil rights movements in the US, which influenced and allied with the New Left.

One of the most prominent figures of the New Left was a British historian named Edward Palmer Thompson,²¹ a Marxist historian and initially a member of the British Communist Party. Later he grew disillusioned with the party after it refused to condemn the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. He left the party that year, although he remained a Marxist, calling for his fellow Marxists to oppose Stalinism.^a

As a part of his campaign, Thompson sought to redefine Marxist thought; Marxists maintained that class was a rigid category, like species or genus. Thompson argued that class was not a structure; it was an identity created by relationships between people. In his most prominent book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, he writes, “Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.”

a After Josef Stalin, who headed the USSR Communist Party from 1922 to 1953.

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To show this principle in action, he looked at texts, songs, and stories from the English working class, during the nascent stage of capitalism. A particularly striking example was that of the Luddites, commonly viewed as anti-technology agitators who destroyed machines and factory equipment. Thompson showed that these were not technophobic simpletons. They opposed rapid technological advances because they recognised that the industrialisation of society was threatening their way of life and material well-being. There were other sections that were rapidly suppressed by the industrial revolution, such as skilled artisans whose labour was no longer important since machines could do their job faster. Thompson discovered that the industrial revolution had created a shared proletariat identity among these disparate groups.

This idea of class consciousness was revolutionary since it reoriented the New Left's focus away from elitism and towards the plight of the oppressed. And the concept of identity creation lies at the heart of the intersectionality of current left-wing politics. Intersectional politics, or identity politics, at its core recognises that the forces of history and historical events impact different groups of people differently. In the US, as the New Left was campaigning for economic justice, the civil rights movement was campaigning for the end of segregation and equal rights for African Americans. The two movements worked closely together, and racial justice became an important cause for the New Left. Further, the LGBTQ movement was becoming more vocal in their demand for liberties and rights; thus this too became another cause for the New Left. The oppression faced by specific groups leads them to a shared identity or 'consciousness'. The social justice movement recognises this fact, and at its heart, is about making reparation for historical events that have led to worse outcomes for marginalised groups of people.

To take the examples of the African American and LGBTQ communities again, the Black identity in the US is not defined simply as the colour of a person's skin but has been impacted and shaped by the subjugation they are experiencing. It encompasses 256 years of abject, brutal slavery with no material restitution for the enslaved people once they were freed,²² with laws that legalised segregation (Jim Crowe laws) and the hate campaigns of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan preventing African American communities from benefiting from Reconstruction (the effort made in 1865-77 to redress the inequities created by slavery) and denying them political representation.²³

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Further, the African American community in the US South was also denied its due share of the massive post-Second World War era economic investment (especially the benefits of the G.I. Bill of 1944, which subsidised further education and training for returning Second World War servicemen) since segregation significantly limited college education for African Americans. Black people were also underfunded due to redlining²⁴ – the banking practice of refusing loans to those residing in neighbourhoods dominated by African Americans, considering them too high a security risk. According to the US Census, this has led to a massive wealth gap between Black and White households; the median income for White households in 2019 was USD76,057, and for Black households, USD46,073.²⁵

Since poverty exacerbates crime, this has led to a disproportionate amount of crime in African American neighbourhoods, which is used as an excuse for draconian policing and criminal charges against people in those neighbourhoods. Police brutality has led to innocent Black men and women like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, and many more, losing their lives, and countless others being incarcerated for crimes they did not commit. The activists and community leaders who speak out against such abuse do not fare much better and have been victims of violent suppression, be it Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X or Fred Hampton. It should be no surprise then that King was also a socialist who argued for reparations to the Black community and a universal basic income for all citizens.²⁶ He stated, “The first thing I would like to mention is that there must be recognition on the part of everybody in this nation that America is still a racist country. Now, however unpleasant that sounds, it is the truth. And we will never solve the problem of racism until there is recognition of the fact that racism still stands at the centre of so much of our nation and we must see racism for what it is.”²⁷

The argument against systemic racism is not new; however, for the first time in American history, civil rights movements like the Black Lives Matter (BLM) have received widespread positive attention. The right-wing and centrists continue to demonise these movements, the same way they did in King’s time, when the civil rights movement faced opposition from both moderates and segregationists. The FBI Counterintelligence Programme, or COINTELPRO as it was called, sought to survey, infiltrate and discredit civil rights movements.²⁸

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Similarly, LGBTQ identity has also been shaped by historical events. The notion of homosexuality being unnatural has never been held through all of history. Achilles, one of the greatest heroes of western literature, was deeply in love with Patroclus, whose death prompted him to return to the Trojan War.²⁹ It is theorised that Alexander the Great, one of the greatest conquerors in history, was in love with Hephaestion, a general in his army.³⁰

The modern gay identity, however, is shaped by centuries of repression due to anti-sodomy laws enforced by Abrahamic religions. The call for decriminalising homosexuality was presented as far back as 1749 by Thomas Cannon. Even the founder of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, argued that homosexuality was a victimless crime and not deserving of social stigma or criminal charges. He regarded popular negative attitudes to homosexuality as irrational prejudice, fanned and perpetuated by religious teachings.³¹ Anti-homosexuality laws have condemned artists and scientists alike, from Oscar Wilde to Alan Turing. However, like many other social movements, the LGBTQ movement became prominent in the US in the 1960s. This crystallised in the Stonewall Riots, when a group of gay men, lesbians, drag queens and transgender women at a bar in New York City resisted a police raid.³² The identity of the community is inextricably linked with the historical forces that shaped it. While there has been some progress in recent years towards LGBTQ acceptance, their history of combating prejudice must not be forgotten.

It is for this reason that intersectionality or identity politics is essential to the left. It is the left which recognises that the forces of history tend to marginalise different communities. It is the left that champions the cause of the exploited, be it workers, women, African Americans, or the LGBTQ community. One such example of intersectional solidarity was the Lesbians and Gays Support Miners (LGSM) movement, which backed the miners in the UK who went on strike to protest the policies of the Margaret Thatcher government in the 1980s.

The Impact of Leftism on Contemporary U.S. Politics

In the aftermath of the New Deal in the 1930s,^b the Democratic Party in the US adopted a left-leaning stance, seeking to ensure the welfare of all citizens. It introduced social security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the GI bill. All these policies sought to guarantee better material conditions for the American people, and they became the foundation of the ‘American dream’. This continued into the 1960s, with policies such as Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty. It was also Johnson who signed the equal rights act, which cemented the Democrats as the party of the left in the US.

To compete with the Democrats, even Republican presidents like Richard Nixon had to adopt more progressive economic programmes. However, in the 1970s, due to rising oil prices, US economic growth stagnated, and inflation was rampant. This led many to conclude that the left-oriented Keynesian/New Deal economics had failed. With the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, *laissez-faire* capitalism (or neo-liberalism) was popularised again. Neo-liberalism championed unregulated free markets and demonised welfare programmes and taxation. Reagan reduced government spending on welfare and brought down taxes on income and capital gains; he also limited governmental regulations and the trade unions’ collective bargaining power. Under Bill Clinton in the 1990s, the Democrats also adopted a neo-liberal stance. As such, both major parties in the US are now right-wing.³³

However, the Democrats are still marginally to the left of the Republicans on issues such as reproductive, LGBTQ, and civil rights. There are also different shades of opinion within the Democrats, and in recent years, there has been a rise of its more progressive wing, with politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez becoming more prominent. There has also been increased support from the American public for policies like Medicare for all,^c which has led to increasing tension between establishment Democrats and the progressive wing.³⁴ This was evident in the 2016 and 2020 Democrat primaries: in both elections, there was a concerted effort by the Democratic Party and mainstream news outlets to ensure that a more conservative figure won the primaries and not Bernie Sanders, who self-identifies as a democratic socialist.

b The New Deal was a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939

c 63 percent of US adults polled said the government was responsible for providing universal healthcare coverage.

The Impact of Leftism on Contemporary U.S. Politics

The Democrats also consistently scapegoat their progressive wing, blaming them for electoral losses and using every opportunity to belittle them. This was evident in the aftermath of the 2020 elections to the House of Representatives where, following some unexpected reverses for the Democratic Party (though it retained its majority) some of its members such as Rep. Abigail Spanberger blamed their losses on the rhetoric of the progressives.³⁵ Even so, it has been found that the majority of Americans support progressive policies such as free college education, increased minimum wage, longer maternity leave, and Medicare for all, for which the progressive wing of the Democrats continues to fight.³⁶

Conclusion

Leftist politics is about challenging social hierarchies. The term 'left-wing' originated during the French Revolution to refer to the liberal, anti-monarchic faction and has been used since then to refer to progressive politics in general. During the Industrial Revolution, left-wing politics became associated with economic justice and workers' rights and was heavily influenced by the works of Marx. However, due to the repressive and imperialist actions of the USSR, the 'New Left' was formed, which was opposed to imperialism and nuclear armament. E. P. Thompson's works gave the New Left a focus on historically marginalised communities, and in the US, it became associated with the civil rights and LGBTQ movements.

Modern leftist politics tries to achieve a more egalitarian society by pursuing economic reform, as well as equal rights for historically marginalised communities. In contemporary US, both major political parties are right-wing. However, progressive policies are supported by the majority of US citizens, and with the rise of the progressive wing of the Democrat party, left-wing politics might see a resurgence. [ORF](#)

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Aarnav Chaturvedi is a Physics major at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org