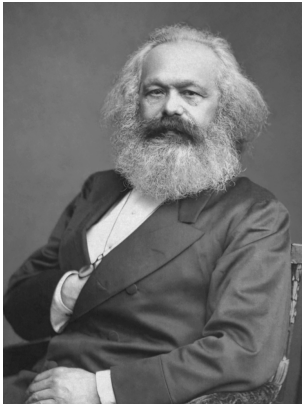


# Red Like Me

written by Alan Wald | July 24, 2025



*Karl Marx in America* is a book that lives up to the promissory note of its title. Careful, logical, and sober, it aims to restore the continuity of a viable Marxist presence to the imaginary of U.S. intellectual history. On the flip side (spoiler alert!), if your notion of a contemporary Marxist appraisal of Marxist writing is a lot of sanctimonious preachments about race, class, and gender, or eviscerations of backsliders and renegades, you might as well put this doorstep back on the floor. Its 600 pages provide a contextualized genealogy of those who popularized as well as critiqued the theories of the bushy-bearded and stern-looking man affectionately dubbed “the Old Rhineland.”

Marxism in the United States, when capaciously understood, was never constrained to the reiteration of a set of dogmatic principles one associates with party ideologues. Its ideas evolved through intense critical debates and subtle reformulations so that a fresh, expansive exploration of this living legacy requires some cool-headed handling. Happily, we now have in Andrew Hartman an articulate interlocutor of that progression, one whose assiduous research is marked by curiosity and open-mindedness. A professor at Illinois State University, Hartman is the initiating president of the Society for U.S. Intellectual History and best known as author of *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (2015). In hindsight, his earlier volume seems like a preparatory warm-up to this much-anticipated new work, a precursor that showcases a talent for investigating disputes in the cultural realm as symptoms of deeper social transitions.

To gauge this latest consideration of the ideas of Marxism in the United States, one must recall how unevenly many intellectual historians have recorded the collective picture of its attendances starting in the nineteenth century. Time and again, in surveys (such as the high-ranking work of historian Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen), syllabi, and academic conference programs, one finds only a handful of episodic references; and these are customarily a sideshow with the implication that U.S. culture possesses a singularly anti-Marxist disposition. Rarely is there a coherent perspective on those diverse thinkers who promoted, rebutted, or creatively reworked the ideas of one of our most momentous interpreters of Modernity.

This has led to an overstated and mistaken perception that Marxism is marginal to U.S. intellectual history. Hartman, in contrast, believes that Marxism has always been operative, even when not on public display. Liberals, conservatives, and reactionaries all felt the need to address the challenge of Marxism. And in times of social quiescence, a subset of Marxist intellectuals continued to address the ruthless anti-social logic of capitalism behind the scenes, frequently preparatory to a re-emergence owing to economic or political crisis. What is more, our present Gilded Age state of affairs of vast economic inequality and a billionaire class consolidating state power has brought Marxist thought closer to the mainstream than it has been since the 1930s.

## Why We Keep Turning to Marx

In the hands of many of us, the interactive complexity of Hartman's material might augur that the plot of this colossal volume is going to be a mess. Yet the long gestation of *Karl Marx in America* has enabled Hartman's mastery of material so that most of the complications of its scope and breadth are managed with brio. Then there is the virtue of his transnational American Studies approach that allows the use of sources too often siloed in different disciplines; this yields some captivating takes on distinct issues. Such intellectual dexterity in topics a bit afield of standard American Studies is unmistakable as soon as the book opens. We are met with a striking demonstration of what the United States meant to Marx himself, writing from Europe, and how it affected his thinking: "The Civil War, which Marx interpreted as on a par with the American and French Revolutions, provided him with some of the raw materials he needed to complete the painstaking analysis in *Capital*" (14).

Hartman then makes the unexpected announcement that the largest body of Marx's published writings in his lifetime, as well as the most widely read, were his *New York Daily Tribune* articles from 1852 to 1861. Moreover, what these and other journalistic pieces reveal is that Marx's study of the United States enhanced his central insight that political emancipation is insufficient for social liberation: "The American Revolution divided the political realm, where citizens were in theory equal before a secular state, from the civil realm, where people were free to be their own religious and economic agents even if impinging upon the freedom of others" (16). In his later coverage of the Civil War for the Viennese *Die Presse*, Marx also pointed to slavery as revealing economic facts that wages conceal, and he argued that "Lincoln was a new kind of democratic leader, the antithesis of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte and the other despicable guardians of the Old Order" (42).

What excited Marx above all was his conviction that abolition was the necessary precursor to throwing off the yoke of capitalism itself, and thus to the realization in the United States of a complete freedom from the mastery of others by means of collective self-rule. This model of freedom becomes the compelling throughline of *Karl Marx in America* that sustains the overall arc of his approach. To wit: Intellectuals and activists in the United States keep turning to Marx, Hartman observes, because something is missing in the available thinking about life under capitalism—a theory of freedom that incorporates but goes beyond formal political rights. In U.S. history, the freedom of some has always required the unfreedom of others, which requires an examination of the forms of power in the hidden depths of the economic system.

Therefore, on the condition that capitalism prevails, versions of Marxism keep being reborn because it speaks to this mysterious contradiction; one embodied in the capitalist system. Simply put, unlike feudalism, capitalism doesn't openly reveal its actual operations regarding exploitation and oppression. To navigate the pages that follow, one must understand how Hartman employs two complementary strategies. Although the results are sometimes uneven, they effectively map multiple U.S. responses to this paradox of unfreedom in what came to be called "the free world."

## A Triad of Reworkings

First, Hartman parses a large number of iterations of Marxism by pursuing a triad of reworkings: "[T]hree distinct versions of Marx emerged [in the United States]: the Marx who famously centered labor as the driving force of value in a capitalist society; the Marx whose ideas mixed with other American political traditions to form hybrid political tendencies; and the Marx whose repulsive theories helped liberals and conservatives work out their own ideas about America" (7). Accordingly, with his eye always on a materialist frame, Hartman takes us on a journey in which he commendably acknowledges the porous boundaries of this trio of interpretations. Simultaneously, he negotiates the intellectual landscape between the granules of the practice of individuals and the sweep of U.S. history.

Those who prioritized a focus for achieving freedom by centering the exploitation of labor include Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs, union leader A. Philip Randolph, and democratic socialist U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders. Those who sought freedom by cross-fertilizing Marxism with other schools of thought include women's suffrage and "free love" activist Victoria Woodhull, former Communist Lewis Corey, feminist psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, and Black radical Cedric Robinson. When it comes to those who confronted Marxism to variously defeat what they perceived to be its concept of freedom in the post-World War II era, Hartman offers the most complicated component of this journey.

Liberals who directly tackled Marxism and sought to correct its limitations by proposing alternatives in an enticing manner, include Jewish émigré political theorist Hannah Arendt, economic historian Walt Rostow, and sociologist Daniel Bell. Such thinkers, of course, were operating in the ambience of a deeply hostile and crude anti-Marxism promoted by ex-Communist spy Whitaker Chambers and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who saw "Marxism as the primary threat to religious and other cherished traditions" (305). Yet there were also more thought-provoking conservative writers Hartman characterizes as "traditionalists," starting with political philosopher Russell Kirk and Ludwig von Mises of the neo-liberal Geneva School. Another formidable component of this multi-front assault on the New Deal legacy, branding Marxism as authoritarian, was the specialty of political economist Joseph A. Schumpeter and "public choice" economist James Buchanan.

Hartman offers both a fair-minded and compelling assessment of those who sought innovative as well as adversarial ways to address Marxism. His tripartite approach makes sense because the overall dialogic evolution of Marxist thought on the U.S. continent is consistent with the formation of Marxism itself. After all, the published and unpublished writings of Marx are best understood to be a hybrid of its own; one shaped by decades of scholarly debate with Young Hegelians and economists. And most recently there has been renewed attention to understanding Marxism as a blended political philosophy.

A prime example is Bruno Leipold's *Citizen Marx: Republicanism and the Formation of Karl Marx's Social and Political Thought* (2024), which makes the case that the mature Marxism stood for a "social republic," one that combined Republican thought—forged in opposition to feudal authoritarianism—with the emergent socialist responses to the new factory system. This perception not only accounts for the readiness with which U.S. thinkers can allocate different emphases to components of Marxism; it also justifies an ampler definition of Marxism itself, more along the lines of a method (historical materialism, dialectical thinking) than a congealed doctrine (insisting on the truth of the falling rate of profit, the dialectics of nature, and so on).

Hartman's second stratagem is to relitigate the earlier laconic representations of Marxism in U.S. intellectual history through a steady parade of nine rubrics that serve as chapter titles, starting with "American Revolutionary" and closing with "Specter Haunting." Such a tactic at first seems quite a stretch considering the massive historical terrain to be embraced—the U.S. Civil War, the Gilded Age, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, mid-century liberalism, postwar conservatism, the New Left, academia in the age of Reagan, and twenty-first-century capitalism. Gathering so many events and scores of heterogeneous thinkers under nine snappy headings is a two-edged sword. We know in advance that imposing any sort of narrative logic on the past, and extracting consonance from messy history, tends toward reducing multiplicities to singularities. Experts on specific topics are sure to grimace at some hit-or-miss summaries.

Furthermore, Hartman's introduction of such a massive cast of persons of interest (only a fraction of which can be mentioned here) results in a handful of misidentifications of minor characters, and some political itineraries are a bit fudged. (No, the German-born Benjamin Stolberg was not a "black journalist" [225] even though he corresponded with W. E. B. DuBois; and C. L. R. James didn't break

with the Trotskyist movement in 1940, but 1950, despite sojourning in several parties.). Now and then contradictory individuals are jammed under political labels that don't entirely work for me (such as describing right-wing social democrat Sidney Hook as a "cranky neoconservative" [363] and endorsing historian Touré Reed's characterization of writer Ta-Nehisi Coates as "neoliberalism's most visible black emissary" [491]).

Yet this dive into 600 dense pages turns out to be less of a luge ride through a torrent of names, books, organizations, and events than one might imagine. Despite some divergent judgments on episodes that I will discuss, and a recognition that every pertinent issue simply can't be tackled, I find Hartman to be an agile taxonomist. His embedding of the Marxist tradition in episodes of U.S. history is remarkable because he is shining a light on the past to help us rethink the present. Therefore, instead of experiencing a whistle-stop tour of 175 years of intellectual discourse and engagement, one is continually gripped by a sense that all this is a precondition to the imagining of possible futures. Moreover, his leitmotifs distill dominant trends in Marxist thinking so that he can group his cast of characters around functional labels, ones that capture a perspective in accord with the historical moment.

### **A Critical Turning Point**

As I see it, prior to World War I, the search in the United States for an answer to capitalism's negations of freedom parallels the trajectory of Marx's own development from his concern over political democracy to an awareness of hidden economic constraints. We are initially treated to the earliest varieties of Marxism, which Hartman explores in writings and undertakings of German communist émigrés supporting abolitionism and women's suffrage. As we move into the twentieth century, labor organizers increasingly come into play, along with a series of socialist authors explicating Marxist economics. Things heat up as Hartman approaches the watershed moment of the 1917 Russian Revolution. He explores the growing differentiation between Progressivism and socialism, as well as U.S. non-revolutionary "revisionists" and the prairie radicalism of rural Oklahoma. Then there are early advocates of Black liberation, militant women who variously negotiated gender and class concerns, and a substantial presence of bohemian Marxists centered in Greenwich Village who are especially notable for a militant opposition to World War I.

A critical turning point comes with the October Revolution, which produced nothing less than a Copernican shift in the valence of Marxist politics in the United States. The result was two-fold: Those on the Far Left breathlessly saw evidence that it was now possible to lead workers to seize state power, while those who felt they had a stake in the existing system became violently fearful of "menacing outside agitators" (146). As we move toward the Great Depression, the Communist Party (CP-USA) found itself at the center of activism. With his eye trained far more on treatments of Marx than "Soviet machinations" (193), Hartman is dismissive of CP-USA leader William Z. Foster's *Toward Soviet America* (1932), characterizing it as symptomatic of "grandiosity and sectarianism," (196). In contrast, Louis Fraina, a former Communist intellectual turned fellow traveler, surfaced to public notice under the name Lewis Corey and brilliantly challenged the ideas of British economist John Maynard Keynes in *The Decline of American Capitalism* (1934).

This was part of an opening salvo in a series of highly engaging Great Depression writings in the vein of hybrid efforts to "reconceive Marx for America" (204). One was by John Dewey's student and Communist fellow traveler Sidney Hook in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* (1933). Hook's attempt to defend pragmatist epistemology as compatible with social revolution resulted in a Stalinist condemnation of his work; and it was also challenged by Max Eastman (another Dewey student) as well as by Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). Hartman goes on to make a convincing case for the 1930s as a hotbed of inspired Marxist thinking outside the Communist and Socialist parties as he appraises literary critics such as V. F.

Calverton and Kenneth Burke as well as Black communists such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Abram Harris, and C. L. R. James.

This perspective may serve as a wake-up call for those of us on the Marxist Left who consider ourselves “Friends of Freedom,” because we need to think more deeply about how activist political commitment relates to intellectual ingenuity. After my own experiences in the chaotic Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the late 1960s, I’ve long been a partisan of seriously organized socialist movements (let us say, Leninism lite). After all, many of the achievements that Hartman admires in labor action and fighting for justice for racial minorities could not have come about in the absence of a disciplined organization and a clear political program. Still, I must admit that, if one sees Marxism as a window into new intellectual worlds, the scholarly needle in Hartman’s review points toward a discomfiting conclusion. Confinement within U.S. Communist parties promoted mainly the intellectual dissemination of Stalinist (Marxist-Leninist) orthodoxy, often bound to simple slogans and emotional professions of a religious type of “faith” in the preordained triumph of the working class.

In contrast, those with looser organizational doctrines engaged in more stimulating efforts to update and organize around Marxist principles. Hartman does not pursue the matter in any depth, but the argument is clearly present if one takes note of the writers he discusses and those he ignores (James Allen, Earl Browder, Herbert Aptheker, V. J. Jerome, Max Shachtman). The failure of the latter to gain any traction in Hartman’s narrative implicitly points to a potential weakness in the culture of Stalinist cadre groups. Yes, the daily practice of Party intellectuals may be more effective if they are part of a robust organization, and their loyalty to Marxism can be longer lasting. On the other hand, their parties often created an insular, circumscribed world, one anathema to those who prefer their Marxists to be restless seekers, cosmopolitan, and ecumenical.

The situation is conspicuously different in other countries. Numerous Marxist thinkers of world-class stature have somehow been members even of Stalinist parties and Maoist sects (Eric Hobsbawm, Louis Althusser, Dominco Losurdo), and most “Trotskyist intellectuals” are connected *not* with neoconservative apostasy but the revolutionary Left (Daniel Bensaïd, Alex Callinicos, Ernest Mandel). The culture of the organized Left requires far more thought and examination than it has received, especially through transnational comparisons.

Just as disconcerting to militants may be the way Hartman understands elements of the liberalism fashioned in the 1930s, and how even the more “progressive” versions were actually aimed at saving capitalism. First came Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who crafted a new type of liberalism to preserve the system, distinct from that of nineteenth-century Europeans. It was based on the notion “that an activist government was ultimately responsible for guaranteeing an economy that worked for everyone, including the working class” (237). What may be unexpected for some Left-wing readers is Hartman’s next move. That’s because he segues into a discussion of “The Popular Front Against Marx,” in which Communists end up acting “as a junior partner in the New Deal coalition” (246).

In contradiction to the celebration of Popular Front culture that has been hegemonic on the U.S. Left since the decline of 1960s’ radicalism, Hartman argues that the Popular Front promoted a kind of “self-censorship” and “de-emphasizing of Marx” that prefigured and assisted the “mid-century erasure of Marx that would follow” (246). From here the book moves to World War II and then the Cold War. At that time, following the years in which the production of books about Marx seemed to be racing along on all gas with no brakes, the Left faced something more than a mere speedbump. Marx was now a “bête noir” instead of a “source of positive inspiration” (256). I’ve already noted the strengths of some of Hartman’s coverage of the period, but I wish that the subject of the negative responses to Marxism—especially those by disillusioned supporters—were not restricted to this chapter alone. The matter should have been pursued all the way to the end of the book.

After all, even if such anti-radical intellectual work was sidelined during the 1960s and 1970s, deradicalization is a persistent and major problem in the Marxist tradition. And a continuity of themes and arguments by ex-radicals can be easily traced from the High Cold War moment of the 1950s to the “Second Thoughts” crowd of the late 1980s; and then to the “decent Left” circle of the Euston Manifesto in 2006. This lineage is also evident in present-day post-liberals as well as the former SDSers and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) members denouncing the nonviolent BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement apropos Israel and the Columbia University Gaza protestors. Their impact cannot be ignored, for nothing throws shade like zealots turned apostates.

As Hartman moves closer to the appearance of the New Left, the narrative goes on the upswing. A middle-class movement was starting to emerge after the Second Red Scare (the late 1940s through the early 1950s), years when several beleaguered intellectuals managed to keep the Marxist tradition alive. In the late 1950s and early 1960s there soon came into view prefigurations of a nascent social movement through intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School and also radical mavericks filling out an emerging landscape of an innovative kind of Marxism. These pioneering New Left thinkers were joined by a diverse cohort of Black Power radicals and radical feminists. None of these theorists can be taken as the perfect Leftist; their lives were filled with inner conflicts, contradictions, illusions, and sometimes access to unusual personal privilege. Nevertheless, there were many, like Howard Zinn and Angela Davis, who devoted their intellectual skills to building admirable social movements that they defended with perseverance and dedication.

### **Critical Reappropriation**

Not just a tourist in Marxist culture, Hartman drops himself into the narrative and introduces his own career trajectory as an illustration of twenty-first-century Marxism in the concluding section. As soon as he became aware of capitalism’s fundamentally exploitative nature, he began searching for a better understanding of freedom and was drawn to Marxist political tropes by the 1990s rock band “Rage Against the Machine.” Hartman then turned to Zinn’s somewhat “moral” and “eclectic” (438) *A People’s History of the United States* (1995) before witnessing a resurgence of mainstream interest in Marx around 1997. This was followed by massive protests at the 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization that took these ideas “off the page and into the streets” (465).

Working his way through Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000), Hartman found the political landscape changing before his eyes with the 2008 stock market crash and Occupy Wall Street movement. Now Marxism was truly gaining a foothold in national political discourse in a moment of danger, intimating the restoration of lost futures. Events were vivifying the exegesis of *Capital* by urban geographer David Harvey, as was the emerging millennial socialist movement. Most notable was the growth of DSA, the founding of *Jacobin*, the increasingly militant environmental movement, and the mass mobilizations of Black Lives Matter. Hartman ends on a high note with a replenished emphasis on Marx’s idea of freedom, a theme already coursing through this book like a fluorescent tracer dye. The centrality of this concept is underlined in the final pages through Hartman’s lauding of the centrality of Marxist freedom in Canadian sociologist William Clare Roberts’s *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (2018) and Swedish philosopher Martin Hagglund’s *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (2019).

Much about this book is so energizing that it tempts me, as a reviewer, toward frequent Caps-lock moments. Still, to build a socialist movement for the future the Left must critically reappropriate all the elements of our history—the good, the bad, and the delusionary. Here the book is not without flaws due to silences and elisions, and the need to condense so many vast topics, guarantees that aspects will fall through the cracks. Hartman, for example, pays much attention to domestic economic and labor developments, but there are several troubling blind spots. How is it possible that Hartman, who follows electoral matters up to at least 2021, fails to recognize that a normalization of

the once-marginalized extreme Right was advancing for decades before the 2016 election of Trump? The Tea Party is dismissed and MAGA never cited, leaving the reader unprepared for a present when the United States could be veering toward a fascism of a novel kind.

It's also rather surprising that the whole topic of Zionism and Palestinian rights never even comes up. Although the Communist movement modulated if not obscured anti-Zionism during the late 1940s and 1950s, it was kept alive by the Trotskyists and Jewish dissident groups. Then, starting in the late 1960s, condemnation of Israel's treatment of Palestinians became a passionate concern of Noam Chomsky, New Leftists, and the African American Left, lasting for decades as a small but persistent commitment. Unexpectedly, this issue, involving a grasp of settler-colonialism as well as Israel's role as a handmaiden of U.S. imperialism, was moved dramatically from the periphery toward the forefront of the U.S. Left after "Operation Cast Lead" in 2008. Nonetheless, words like "Zionism" and "Arab" are absent, as is the name of Columbia University scholar Edward Said, who rocketed to fame as a radical Palestinian scholar as far back as the sensational publication of *Orientalism* in 1978. Palestine is cited only once in reference to a concern of Mexican Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos.

Some of the thorniest issues that have vexed U.S. Marxists are simply evaded by Hartman's tendency to skirt around several hot topics of foreign policy. Surely the incapacity of much of U.S. Marxism to wean itself from illusions about and apologetics on behalf of self-proclaimed revolutionary regimes and movements outside the United States must be balanced against its remarkable clear-sightedness regarding the inequality and injustice of U.S. capitalism, racism, colonialism, and imperialism. The Marxist debates on the Left among intellectuals about the nature of Stalinism are not well-served in the volume, nor are various responses to the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, Castroism, and more.

True enough, this is not a book about factions on the Left, although Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps have shown that that topic can be addressed with sophistication and balance in *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (2015). Yet the ideas and practice of Mao, Guevara, and many others influenced U.S. intellectual work beyond vague sources of inspiration, while the earlier kind of thinking associated with Soviet apologetics might still be seen in certain aspects of the political views of the highly influential political theorist Jodi Dean.

In the end, though, Hartman's reclaiming of the meaning and memory of Marxism in the United States is essential for at least two reasons. The most obvious one is his foregrounding of Marxism's principle of freedom as objectively central even though it may be appearing now in more expressive and overt forms; one must have reason to wager that humanity can make a new and better world before acting toward that goal. A second is Hartman's understanding that it is the persistence of capitalism that is the basis for Marxism's continual renewal and reinvention, not any seamless march to the future by a historically predestined class. For me, this latter point is a welcome vindication of a non-teleological usable past, making possible better informed and innovative strategies for a revitalized socialist movement of the future.

What we need more than ever is a Marx for the age of Trump, a time when the brilliance of Marx's understanding of capitalism is widely acknowledged even as the political solution of the Marxist project (working-class revolution) seems to be in question. In Hartman's scholarship we find confirmation that it is in Marxist critiques of Marxism that one can find the most thought-provoking avenues for possible explanations and guidance. In *Karl Marx in America*, this is achieved through a double exposure: A kind of presentation of the past in the present, a process of relearning what we have forgotten or perhaps never knew. After all, if we don't first interpret the world, we sure as hell can't change it.