

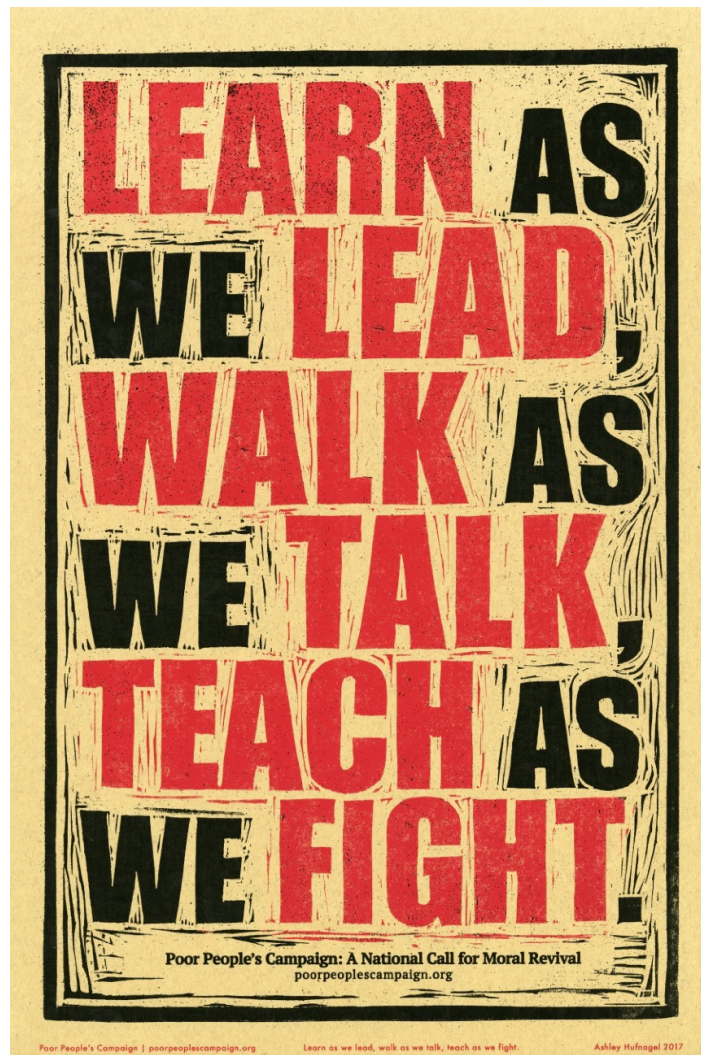
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

A Student-Initiated Course in Socialism

by Eric Arnesen, David Ebb, Stephen Rome, and Stephen Ward

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LEARN AS WE LEAD, WALK AS WE TALK, TEACH AS WE FIGHT BY ASHLEY HUFNAGEL VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

"The most effective way to cope with change is to help create it."

- Salada Tea Bag

"Before coming to Wesleyan I was in an undergraduate foreign service program at Georgetown University. There, theory had neither morality nor personality. TSA [Towards a Socialist America] has given me the confidence to unlearn the myths of neo-classical economic and federal process. I also now realize a commitment to alternative ideology in every classroom. It's funny, but TSA is a presence on campus. It challenges all disciplines, theories, and formulae."

"I guess TSA was like my first feminist consciousness-raising group in that it was concerned with that area of politics which is experienced as personal. What was so thrilling for me about the course was to be given a chance to participate in the educational experience, instead of just sitting back and accepting the facts of capitalism as gospel truth because a professor was offering them to me to swallow whole, as had been the case in my professor-taught courses. TSA has meant taking a step out of thinking those symptoms of capitalism are 'natural' or o.k., by articulating them and trying to put them into an intellectual framework."

"It was really perfect for me. I knew I was Left politically, I knew that things had to be changed, but I had no coherent framework to help me put these feelings together. I actually learned more Marxist analysis from another course, but in TSA I had a chance to talk these things over with people. It made me realize how little time we spent actually discussing ideas in other courses, because we were always so busy reading this or that book and listening to somebody's lectures. I really enjoyed being in a class where we could exchange ideas about things that are important to our lives."

"First semester, Freshperson year, my faculty advisor suggested I look into a course called Towards A Socialist America. What a way to begin a college career! I was one of two freshpeople in the course and spent the next 3 1/2 months totally overwhelmed; mental and emotional overload; I left the course on a liberal note, telling the class, 'You haven't fully convinced me' They smiled. A year later I was heavily involved in Wesleyan's Socialist Organizing Committee, South Africa Action Group, Nuclear Resistance Group and the Clamshell Alliance. My college course load looks like I'm majoring in radical studies...."

- four TSA alumni

Introduction

What would life be like in the USSA (United Socialist States of America)? How do we get there? Taking a college course won't provide all the answers. But that didn't deter a Wesleyan University Junior, Andy Polsky, from organizing the original version of Towards a Socialist America (TSA) during the winter of 1975-76. He initially hoped that a

Government Department professor would sponsor the course. When this seemed unlikely, he contacted Dick Ohmann in the English Department, who agreed to help set up a group tutorial for the spring semester of 1976. Eight people were involved in that seminar, and they became the TA's (Teaching Apprentices) for the course in the fall.

Many students felt the need for a course of this nature. Over 70 took it the next fall, and 35 more in the spring. In 1977-78, a total of 70 students have taken the course, and we expect at least as many next year. In addition, the course has consistently been able to generate future TA's from within the class, thus ensuring its continuity.

TSA was originally intended as an advocacy course for people who felt themselves to be on the political Left, and were seeking creative solutions to the problems of advanced capitalism in the U.S. It has since taken a somewhat looser approach in order to accommodate the varying expectations that people have brought to it. But at all times it has taken an explicitly anti-capitalist stance, and so dealt with material in a way that was unique at Wesleyan. In fact, because there were no Marxist professors in the Economics or Government Departments, the course content itself was at first unique in the university. It developed because of the need people felt to integrate their political and academic experiences. As Polsky said, "We wanted to bring a number of our political concerns into the classroom." Clearly, many others felt the same way, and for six semesters students have continued to be responsible for developing the course.

The Students

With a title like "Towards a Socialist America," a deliberate rejection of supposed objectivity, and a student-led format, how would anyone dare to take this course? As Wesleyan is an elite university, the student body is mainly white, middle- and upper- middle class; so are the students in TSA. During the first two semesters it was offered, students in the class were mostly juniors and seniors. Recently more freshpeople have begun to take the course. Most had been politically active but lacked a unifying theoretical framework. TSA attempts to link issues with ideology and to suggest what socialism could mean in this country. In doing so, it serves an important function by providing politically active people with an understanding of the connections among various issues and by giving them a firmer base from which to become politically involved. And it helps unify the various political movements at Wesleyan. For the already politically active, TSA responds to a real need, and this is a good part of the reason why it has been a successful and continuing course in the university.

At first, few black students took the course. This spring, however, TSA had its first section with a substantial number of black students -- 7 of 12 members in one of the sections. They were mainly from New York City, and from private or parochial schools, indicative of their middle-class background. They brought a more hesitant commitment, not only to the content of the class, but to the form as well. They were generally less comfortable with the non-hierarchical classroom structure and with socialism as a future goal. At the same time, this was a rare opportunity for black and

white students at Wesleyan to come together and talk openly about their expectations and concerns in school and beyond. Integrating students who bring significantly varied desires to the course will remain a challenge for TSA in the future.

Form and Process

In addition to the anti-traditional content of the course, TSA's uniqueness owes much to its alternative classroom format. John Houston, one of the original participants, explained: "The emphasis on form evolved because of the student initiative in starting up the course. Students had put the energy into forming the course and felt that an open, supportive structure was important." Jay Kilbourn, also an original participant, added: "We wanted to create a learning environment in which people could explore a new style of education -- where they could both learn and teach and where they could really share their thoughts with each other."

TSA departs from a number of traditional classroom conventions. A single faculty member roves among several sections. These sections usually have ten to twelve people in them, with near sexual parity. We leave the lecture hall to meet in someone's living room or kitchen. Grades are scrapped in favor of comments and conversations. For those who do opt for grades, these are arrived at through continuing discussions and criticism with the TA's and the faculty member. Some sections have experimented with games or exercises at the beginning of some class meetings, in an attempt to build trust and participation. In short, we are committed to a class with a non-hierarchical structure and shared responsibilities.

The dynamics among people are of vital concern. Two "facilitators" -- usually not TA's -- get the meeting started and moderate discussion. Respecting each other's opinions, listening well, supporting each other, and criticizing and self-criticizing (usually at the end of a meeting) are emphasized. True to Movement for A New Society guidelines, facilitators volunteer in advance to make sure voices aren't stepped on and egos aren't subsidized. They are responsible for providing flexible agenda and central ideas from the reading around which to wrap discussion.

Sometimes the process breaks down. We had our share of absenteeism, uncompleted reading, and pre-emptive monologues and dialogues. These problems can subvert even the most engaging topics. And there were even more vexing problems, given the goals of the class. Often men would dominate and women would defer.¹ It has sometimes proven difficult to integrate the few antagonistic students into constructive conversation. We find that we cannot entirely undo twenty years of political and sexual socialization, but we are constantly confronting it through the process that we have established. After everyone is familiar with the technique of facilitation, members of the group alternate intaking the responsibility of facilitator. Some of the best learning takes place the night before class as the pair of facilitators prepares. During this time, it is often a struggle to stick to the material of the course as bits of political autobiography are exchanged. This dimension of

the class defies description. Other more planned efforts at getting to know one another are frequently arranged -- pot-luck brunches and dinners are opportunities to flesh out theory with anecdotes and attitudes. Although some of the readings may intimidate us, the process tends to instill solidarity and a feeling of unity that is a very real and exciting aspect of the course.

Content

The organization of topics and readings in the course changes with every semester that TSA is offered. Each new generation of TA's, chosen from the students who have already taken the course, plans the syllabus for the following semester. Any changes they make in the syllabus reflect their re-evaluation of the course's purpose and design. Some fundamental characteristics of the course, however, remain unaltered. These include an openly socialist-feminist orientation, and constant dedication to the synthesis of theory and practice. Another important aspect of the content that has remained significantly unchanged is the order in which the primary themes of the course are developed.

The course is generally divided into five major sections, each of which builds on theoretical and historical knowledge and the critical skills that have been developed in the previous section. The introductory sessions of the class are devoted to an overview of such problems as sexism and imperialism, and to brief accounts of socialism in other countries. Our readings this semester included *The Communist Manifesto*, the Barbara Walters/Fidel Castro interview, and selections from *The Capitalist System* (Edwards, Reich, and Weisskopf, eds., 2nd ed. [New York: Prentice-Hall, 1978]), a text which is used frequently throughout the semester. In this section, we encouraged people to deal openly with their preconceptions about socialism and to familiarize themselves with some of the more pressing concerns and critical perspectives of socialist thought and activity. This is also a time for people to become acquainted and comfortable with the other members of the class and with the dynamics of collective learning.

This brief introduction is followed by a section on Marxist economics and the structure of modern capitalism. We intend this part of the course to give people the basic tools of Marxist analysis needed to deal coherently and effectively with later portions of the course. To this end we use Ernest Mandel's *Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), Marx's "Wage Labor and Capital," and a large assortment of articles including a slick piece of propaganda assembled by the American Advertising Council, presumptuously titled "The American Economic System." Through these texts we introduce such fundamental terminology and concepts as "proletariat," "bourgeoisie," "surplus," "monopoly," and the "labor theory of value." We also discuss the historical impact of changing modes of production on the relations of production. The second half of this section illustrates these concepts with empirical studies such as Richard J. Barnet and Ronald E. Muller's *Global Reach* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) and *The World of a Giant Corporation: A Report from the G.E. Project* (John Woodmansee, et al. [Seattle: North Country Press, 1975]).

With its application of Marxist tools of analysis, this section is probably the most enlightening part of the course for some of the students. It has also proved to be the most challenging to teach and to learn. We have tried hard to avoid the pitfalls of over-simplifying and bastardizing a subject as vast and complex as Marxian economics. But as carefully and conscientiously as we have designed and presented this vital section, we find that it remains the most unyielding and least satisfying part of the course. Part of the problem is inherent in the lack of time available to spend on any one subject in a course that aspires to accomplish so much -- perhaps too much -- in so little time. Given this problem and the ease with which overviews can turn into caricatures, the emphasis we place on constructive self-criticism -- the class time devoted to reappraising and revising content and process -- is all the more important.

The third major section focuses on work and production. It offers a more detailed, more personal, accounting of the broader, theoretical categories of the previous section. Emphasis on the work process is especially important because few students at Wesleyan have much contact with the working-class world, particularly industrial production and management. Many students, however, find that they can relate this section to their own part-time and summer work experiences.

We spend about three weeks on this section, reading all of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), which serves as our primary text on work and production. Braverman's book is supplemented with selections from *The Capitalist System*, Richard Sennett and Jonathon Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage, 1973), and Studs Terkel's *Working* (New York: Avon, 1975). In addition, some people who took the class this semester went to see *Blue Collar*, a film which confronts many of the issues we had been discussing.

To conclude this part of the course, several meetings deal with sexism and racism, relating these forms of inequality to class and to the productive system. These meetings have consistently been among the most exciting of the semester largely because of the immediate, personal nature of these issues and the way they are deepened by the perspective of the course. Our consideration of sexism and racism is meant to demonstrate how capitalism reinforces and manipulates these prejudices to rationalize inequality and to prevent the development of working-class unity.

The next important section, following closely on our discussions of personal and institutional racism and sexism, deals with hegemony and theories of the state. Here we concentrate on understanding the dialectical relationship between the economic base of capitalism, discussed in the previous two sections, and the political and ideological superstructure of capitalist society. In analyzing this relationship we try to account for the lack of broad-based support for revolutionary change in a society so fraught with inequality. Readings for this section include Lenin's *State and Revolution*, selections from *The German Ideology* (Marx, Engels), an exposition of Gramsci's thought, and a variety of articles dealing with Marxist and non-Marxist views of the

state. We wind up this part of the course with several classes in which we consider the hegemonic role of the media. For next year, plans are underway to expand this section to include a study of ways in which the arts and sciences reflect and legitimize prevailing ideologies.

Having developed a historically-based critique of capitalism using the tools of macro- and micro-analysis acquired during the semester, we spend the final two or three weeks examining various strategies for change. Much of our discussion focuses on the problem of raising class-consciousness and weighing the plausibility and probable outcomes of reform vs. revolution. This unit includes articles about populist movements such as Tom Hayden's, Community Organizing efforts such as Mass Fair Share, Workers Cooperatives, the Communist Party, the Spartacist League, NAM, DSOC, and the anarchist and ecological Left. Speakers were invited this semester from Mass Fair Share, NAM, the Spartacist League, and Movement for a New Society. In addition, students were strongly encouraged to attend talks given by Ralph Miliband, Barbara Ehrenreich, Eli Zaretsky, and Stokely Carmichael. Beyond looking at organized political strategies, we make an effort to discuss how people can bring their political beliefs and values to any job they become involved in. This is done to avoid the impression that being politically concerned and active means giving up everything else.

Though the sequence of the sections has remained fairly constant since the course was first offered, the readings have varied. Changes are made on recommendation of both the TA's and the students taking the course. This evolution makes for a stronger, more flexible course and for one that depends less on faculty initiative than is usual at Wesleyan.

Evaluation

It is difficult to assess the impact that this course has - both upon the people who take it and upon the rest of the Wesleyan community. We would be presuming too much to think that the course has been solely responsible for the recent resurgence of political activism at Wesleyan. But we would certainly be justified in linking in some way the evolution of the course and the growth of the Socialist Organizing Committee, the Nuclear Resistance Group, the South Africa Action Group, the Workplace Committee, and department organizing, as many TSA alumni are integrally involved in these organizations.² We believe that the course has offered structural, analytical, and personal cohesiveness to activism here. It has given the conception and direction of activism a unity that it formerly lacked. Nor has political activity been limited to Wesleyan's campus. Graduates of the course have pursued their political and social concerns through such activities as community organizing (Mass Fair Share, Carolina Action, ACORN), working for DSOC, freelance writing (for *Seven Days*, *In These Times*, *The Progressive*), starting a radical journal about higher education (*Politics and Education*), teaching, and working in the arts and media. Finally, it would be insufficient to evaluate the success of the course strictly in terms of the number of people who become active in movements, as important as that is. Speaking of consciousness-raising may be a bit trite, but we feel confident in claiming that TSA has

been responsible for generating a degree of critical thinking far beyond the number of students who have taken the course.

Stephen Ward, Wesleyan Class of 1980, lost his life in an automobile accident in 1985.

Notes

1. Doubtless this has something to do with under-representation of women in the leadership of the course. All three faculty sponsors have been men, though two women have declared an interest in assuming this role later on. This semester (Fall, 1978) will be the first time that half of the TA's are women. The authorship of this article reflects the same problem; several women had an interest in sharing the task, but other political and academic claims on their time were too great.

2. Socialist Organizing Committee -- an omnibus left political organization, with which perhaps 100 students of various tendencies affiliate themselves. South Africa Action Group - - a group that was formed last fall to support divestiture as a means to weaken the racist regime in South Africa. They have done much educational work and have organized actions, including a mass rally and the occupation of President Campbell's office in support of their demands. Workplace Committee -- a group that helped publicize the concerns of university employees and supported their efforts to unionize over the past year. Department organizing -- students in various departments organized to become involved in the hiring of new faculty members and in curriculum review.

Eric Arnesen, Wesleyan Class of 1980, is the Teamsters Professor of Modern American Labor History at The George Washington University. He is the co-chair of the Washington History Seminar, a joint project of the American Historical Association and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the author of *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics* (1991); *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (2001); and *Black Protest and the Great Migration: A Brief History with Documents* (2002). He is currently finishing a biography of the African American socialist, labor leader, and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph.

David Ebb, a 1978 graduate of Wesleyan, University, is a pediatric hematology-oncology physician at Massachusetts General Hospital who works with Partners in Health to bring children from poor countries to Mass General for cancer treatment. A 1978 graduate of Wesleyan University, he was an early participant in "Towards a Socialist America."

Stephen Rome, Wesleyan Class of 1978, taught social studies for thirty years at Yorktown High School, where he created a Human Rights elective and led the largest Amnesty International Club in the Northeast, (which included Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a four-year participant).



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