

The 20th Century American Left

The books included in my collection reflect my interest in social justice and the American Left. More specifically, each work falls under at least one of the following rubrics: the labor movement and workers' rights, democracy, or socialism. Each book has contributed to my understanding of American society—the social forces decisive in constructing it and the individuals and classes who benefit from it, the values and principles implicit and explicit in it, the alternatives to it. Many challenged the assumptions I had about the prevailing political and economic order. Not a few aided me in understanding how to transform it.

I came to the political Left through a combination of political practice and my own reading. Neither, on their own, would have occasioned dispensing with FDR-style liberalism in favor of democratic socialism. Political practice—getting violently arrested, seeing peaceful demonstrations repressed, witnessing truncheon-wielding cops lay into advancing, but unarmed, protestors—convinced me that something was deeply wrong with the way the American state treats dissenters. However, without books I would have had no analysis, no way of situating those experiences in a broader social, economic, and political context. I would have harbored an inchoate anger, shapeless because of a lack of engagement with theoretical and historical texts. I would have known little about what had gone before me. The activists, organizers, and thinkers who preceded me thought about the same questions with which I grappled, but I would have been ignorant as to their conclusions.

The ideological underpinnings of our political and economic system would have similarly remained a mystery. I do not mean to suggest there is an elaborate conspiracy to obfuscate. I am only suggesting it is axiomatic that the status quo is not maintained by force alone; the vast majority of people in the society buy into—wrongly, in my view—the current configuration of social relations. Most do so unconsciously, without examining what they are acceding to and whether the values they espouse are reflected in the way society is ordered. If we can never fully extricate ourselves from what the theorist Antonio Gramsci called "cultural hegemony," the books on this list at least allowed me to think about which parts of that hegemony are desirable and which we can do without. Finally, the alternatives offered and the figures profiled gave me hope. Without struggle there is no progress, sure. But legions have succeeded before, bequeathing us a better world. We can do the same.

Still, the inherent detachment of reading a work of theory or labor history would not have spurred me to decide that what America needed was a radical transformation, that capitalism had to be transcended. I could read that the FBI had murdered Fred Hampton, that the state had violently smashed strikes and worker actions, that capitalism was an economic system rife with domination and subordination. These things outraged me. But until I actually saw phalanxes of police guarding the nation's major financial institutions, the idea that cops protect capital was a mere abstraction. The visceral had to meet the cerebral.

My experience in Occupy was instrumental in my political and intellectual development. Through it all, the books I was reading and had read informed my actions. I thought of David Graeber's *Direct Action* when I confronted row after row of riot police at the 2012 NATO summit in Chicago. I thought of Sara Evans' *Personal Politics* during Occupy general assemblies. I thought of Robert Dahl's *A Preface to Economic Democracy* as we tried to formulate an alternative to finance capitalism. I thought of *The Making of Pro-Life Activists* as I ruminated on how we could swell the movement. After Occupy dissipated and I had moved on, I thought of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Democracy and Capitalism* as I talked to my co-workers at a luxury condominium building about organizing for a raise. The ideas and concepts in these books were not confined to that rarefied place known as theory; quite the opposite: they were helping me think through practical problems, and reminding of my values. The biographies I read gave me leaders to emulate. Ella Baker, Irving Howe, Michael Harrington—these were personages who possessed exceptional probity and superlative erudition. Reading about the lives of these luminaries made me examine my own.

I started accumulating books at a serious pace as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa. I had long been a bibliophile, but decided if I was going to absorb what I was reading I had to start annotating, noting, underlining. That required amassing my own collection. No more library books. Some of the books in my collection are from The Book Thing, a remarkable place in which people can donate and obtain books free of charge. The rest I purchased from online bookstores, used bookstores scattered across the country, and independent booksellers. Only a handful were new when I bought them. One of the great joys of life is entering a used bookstore with the vague notion that there is a book—at least one book—you have long coveted that the bookstore carries. You just have to find it. I still recall coming upon a few of these and a smile creeping over my face.

Everything I have read informs what I write, how I act. It is my guide. Without this collection, I would be rudderless, fecklessly casting about. But I realize it is incomplete. I want to continue to explore the tension between democracy and capitalism in a systematic and sustained way, as well as learn more about past organizing drives. The books on my wish list satisfy that desire. Ideally, the authors I read also evince an understanding of the craft of writing. Rare is the book that couples exemplary analysis with exemplary prose. I expect *The Essential Ellen Willis* will achieve that enviable melding. Moving forward, I hope my expanding collection will aid my writing career. When I write, I try to meld theory and practice, history and lived experience, in order to provoke and persuade. I am currently an editor and writer at *Jacobin* magazine, a burgeoning socialist quarterly. Our goal is to provide a forum to exchange radical ideas, engage with on-the-ground struggles, and radicalize liberals skeptical of capitalism, but not yet willing to reject it. To be a radical in American society is to be a marginal actor, attempting to influence the mainstream, yet knowing, ideologically, you are something of an interloper. But if, over the course of my life, I am partially successful in helping build a more just world, it will be because I have effectively used the books in this collection to inform my political practice.

The 20th Century American Left: Labor, Democracy, and Socialism

1. Alinsky, Saul. *Rules for Radicals*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971.

The famous community organizer's most famous—and best—book. *Rules* is, by turns, risible and trenchant, and Alinsky never loses sight of the fact that in politics, power matters more than just about anything else. The objective of the Left is to build the power of subordinate groups to win egalitarian reform. Few were better than Alinsky in developing innovative tactics and strategies to further that goal.

2. Archer, Robin. *Why is There No Labor Party in the United States?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Archer spends much time in the 1890s, but the decision by the AFL-CIO to forsake independent political action shaped the trajectory of the entire 20th century. Among advanced capitalist countries, the United States is *sui generis* in that an electorally viable labor party never developed. Instead of comparing the United States with European countries, as is conventionally done, Archer uses Australia as a New World counterpoint. There, labor organized its own political party at the same time the AFL-CIO was making its fateful decision to do the opposite. This study prompts a lot of "what ifs" and conjecturing about a social democratic America.

3. Aronowitz, Stanley. *False Promises*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.

A sort of *Making of the English Working Class* for the United States. Aronowitz draws on his own blue-collar background and explores the construction of working class consciousness as America industrialized. He's sharply critical of the bureaucratization of unions in the post-World War II period.

4. Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dial Press, 1963.

Interrogating the gulf between word and deed, between ideal and reality in American democracy—this was the great métier of Baldwin. Most of the books on this list are fascinating, if not exceptionally well-written. *The Fire Next Time* is one of the obvious exceptions. Baldwin wrote with such ferocity and erudition he can lay claim to being America's best essayist.

5. Barber, Benjamin. *A Passion for Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Sometimes we simply stumble upon our greatest influences. Barber is no radical—he has an essay in this volume entitled "An Epitaph for Marxism"—but he was the first democratic theorist I came across. He valorized citizen participation, and denounced capitalist excess and consumerism as inimical to democratic principles. I was hooked. My commitment to democracy had been latent, it was now apparent and deeply felt. While I've moved further left than Barber, it's only because that commitment he awakened has led to me reject the existing economic and social arrangements.

6. Bernstein, Irving. *The Lean Years*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

The standard, and most comprehensive, study of the interwar working class. As Bernstein's title suggests, these were tough times for the American labor movement and the Left more broadly. The post-World War I Palmer Raids targeted radicals, and union density declined through the 1920s. The silver lining, for those working for a revived labor movement, is that

worker militancy and unionization shot up in the mid-1930s. Could we be on the verge of a comparable upsurge?

7. Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. *Democracy and Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

An exquisite blend of philosophy, economics, and political science, this finds the two radical economics at their apotheosis. The two embrace the language of liberalism, but are informed by Marxist conceptions of power and class struggle. One of my abiding interests is the contradiction between democracy and capitalism, and the ways in which the latter undermines the former. Capitalism, Bowles and Gintis argue, privileges property rights over personal rights; democracy prizes the personal rights over property rights. This contradiction, rather than just class struggle as the orthodox Marxists would have it, is at the heart of every progressive battle.

8. Bowles, Samuel, David M. Gordon, and Thomas E. Weisskopf. *Beyond the Waste Land*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1983.

Bowles and his co-authors were writing at a time when the economic crisis of the 1970s hadn't been definitely resolved. Ronald Reagan's election and the Volcker recession in the early 80s signaled a rightward shift in economic policy, but to read *Beyond the Wasteland* now is to realize that the neoliberal response Reagan and his ideological brethren offered wasn't inevitable. If the Keynesian nostrums of the center-left wouldn't have solved the genuine structural problems the economy was experiencing, Bowles and his co-authors convincingly argue a radically democratic approach—one that would fundamentally challenge private capital—could get rid of economic malaise without inflicting severe harm on workers.

9. Carter, April. *Direct Action and Liberal Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

In this slim volume, Carter examines the New Left's tactic of direct action and its implications for order and justice in liberal democratic societies. I read this a few years before my involvement in Occupy, but I remember having some of the same questions Carter raises—When is civil disobedience justified? When, if ever, does it conflict with the rights of others?—go through my head as I risked arrest. Reflecting back on *Direct Action and Liberal Democracy* helped me answer some of those questions.

10. Cunningham, Frank. *Democratic Theory and Socialism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Democratic theorists aren't known for their engaging prose, and Cunningham's writing is middling at best. However, this is a rigorous examination of whether the great promise of socialism—that it can engender a deeper, richer democracy—is logically well-founded, or simply Left naiveté.

11. Dahl, Robert. *A Preface to Economic Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Dahl is best known for *Who Governs*, in which he established himself as one of the avatars of pluralism, an elitist theory of democracy. Dahl reconsidered his status-quo-sustaining perspective and became troubled by the lack of democracy in the capitalist economy. *A Preface to Economic Democracy* is his most extensive treatment of the subject. Dahl seeks an alternative to state socialism and capitalism, and what he comes up with is a form of democratic socialism

that prizes worker self-management. Characteristically dispassionate and ratiocinative, Dahl examines how we can extend democracy to a presently autocratic sphere.

12. Dobbs, Farrell. *Teamster Rebellion*. Pathfinder

A first-hand account of the 1934 Teamster strike in Minneapolis, which was part of a cascade of labor victories in the mid-1930s. Dobbs, later a leader in the Socialist Workers Party, is no neutral observer—but who is? This book serves as a reminder that workers have had it much worse—and they still banded together and fought back.

13. Evans, Sara. *Personal Politics*. New York: Vintage, 1980.

Evans, a participant in the civil rights movement and feminist movement, documents how the sexism and misogyny women faced in 1960s movements fueled the rise of what we now call second-wave feminism. Movements purporting to fight for social justice often reproduce the same racist, sexist, and homophobic practices that oppressed people experience in the broader society. This was a sobering read that stuck with me through Occupy. It made me cognizant of, and on the look-out for, subtly exclusionary behavior or structures in the movement.

14. Fitch, Robert. *Solidarity for Sale*. New York: Public Affairs, 2006.

Fitch was a longtime union member, but an acidic Left critic of the labor movement. In this book, he holds that union corruption and stasis were the natural result of the AFL-CIO's extreme decentralization. Autonomous locals have become local fiefdoms, Fitch provocatively argues, and a lack of accountability is endemic. Fitch was the sympathetic critic *par excellence*, cajoling to improve labor instead of tear it down.

15. Ginger, Ray. *Eugene V. Debs*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962.

An excellent biography of Eugene Debs, the labor leader, perennial Socialist Party candidate, and antiwar activist. Debs was active at a time of major industrial strife and, in the 1912 presidential election, garnered 6 percent of the popular vote—the most a Socialist has ever received. Eight years later, incarcerated for opposing World War I, he still received nearly one million votes. Debs was one of the 20th century Left's most distinguished leaders; reading his stirring orations still gives goosebumps.

16. Graeber, David. *Direct Action*. Oakland: AK Press, 2009.

Graeber was one of the principal thinkers associated with Occupy, and this is one of his best books. It's a disquisition on direct action that includes the author's experience at the 2002 FTAA summit in Quebec. He also has useful reflections on activist culture, Left strategy, and anarchism. Graeber's a controversial figure, but few are better at joining theory and practice.

17. Hamper, Ben. *Rivethead*. New York: Warner Books, 1991.

Hamper limns his time on an auto assembly line as a riveter. Angry and humorous, the book is especially valuable because of the paucity of working-class perspectives in contemporary publishing.

18. Harrington, Michael. *Socialism*. New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972.

Harrington is my favorite leftist writer, and this is my favorite book of his. It's also the book that convinced me to be a democratic socialist. The founder of Democratic Socialists of

America, Harrington was the paradigmatic practical radical, seeking to build the "left wing of the possible." He rejected utopian idealism and chiliastic adventurism; he pushed for incremental reforms that would bring about a more humane society, but never hid his view that deeper, thoroughgoing change was required. *Socialism* bracingly blends theory, history, and social analysis. At the core of Harrington's argument is that socialism must come from below, rather than be enacted from on high. Harrington never quite wielded the pen like Howe, but he was an exceptional writer in his own right.

18. Henwood, Doug. *Wall Street*. New York: Verso, 1997.

A critical examination of Wall Street, ten years before the financial collapse. While Henwood is an unapologetic radical, even finance capital's defenders would have to grant that the longtime journalist knows his stuff. Much of it went over my head, so I need to revisit it in the future. But as I participated in Occupy, reading *Wall Street* gave me insight into the operation and ideological underpinnings of that odious, if often inscrutable, juggernaut.

18. Howe, Irving. *A Margin of Hope*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Aside from Baldwin, the best writer in the collection. I revere Howe for his beautiful prose, democratic sensibility, and radical politics. The book's subtitle identifies it as "an intellectual autobiography," but the disputes that Howe engaged in were far from parochial, the ideas far from personal and inconsequential. Howe, the founder and longtime editor of *Dissent* magazine, paints splendid portraits of the New York Intellectuals and other important figures. He recounts seminal disagreements he had with Stalinists, McCarthyites, New Left radicals, and others. Permeating the book is the importance of ideas to political action.

19. Isserman, Maurice. *The Other American*. New York: Public Affairs, 2000.

Biography of Michael Harrington.

20. Keller, William W. *The Liberals and J. Edgar Hoover*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

I'd be remiss if I didn't include at least one book on state repression of radicals. Keller's is especially useful because it documents the ways in which liberal elected officials enabled Hoover's authoritarian practices.

21. Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Out to Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

A bit outdated, as women were just beginning to enter the workforce en masse. Still, this book is an excellent history of female workers in the United States. It covers the unwaged household work that the 70s movement Wages for Housework tried to highlight, and waged work outside of the house.

22. Lichtenstein, Nelson. *State of the Union*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

A panoramic survey of the labor movement in 20th century America. From The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, to the Flint Sit-Down Strike, to the busting of PATCO, the seminal moments and the ebbs and flows are all here. There's no better overview of American unionism. As the labor movement continues to try to reverse its declining influence and attempts new strategies, the historical perspective *State of the Union* provides is especially useful.

23. Miliband, Ralph, Marcel Liebman, John Saville, and Leo Panitch, ed. *Socialist Register, 1985/86*. London: Merlin Press, 1985.

Founded in 1964 by Miliband, *Socialist Register* has long been one of the best leftist journals in the English world. The 1985/86 edition features one of my favorite essays on socialist strategy, "Beyond Social Democracy." Miliband and Liebman argue that the reform/revolution dichotomy is antediluvian and irrelevant to advanced capitalist countries. Advocating the enactment of "revolutionary reforms," they seek to chart a path that would avoid both social democratic compromise and Soviet authoritarianism. The edition is replete with fascinating essays, but "Beyond Social Democracy" is the *Register* at its best: analytically rigorous, and practical yet radical.

24. Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1972.

An obligatory choice, as Marx remains canonical for any self-respecting leftist. Reading Marx both gives one a lens through which to view the world, and an idea of the forces which can be mobilized to change it.

25. Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. Verso

Mouffe can write inscrutably, but the first time I read *Democratic Paradox* was truly bracing. The book is essentially a broadside against neoliberalism that asserts the ideology's inherent contingency and contestability. Neoliberal hegemony isn't inevitable, Mouffe held. Neoliberalism can be replaced by a new regnant ideology. While others have written similar things, it was the first time I'd come across the argument made so unapologetically. It was exhilarating, and it gave me hope.

26. Munson, Ziad. *The Making of Pro-Life Activists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Sometimes you can learn from your political enemies. Munson's case study is the pro-life movement, but his broader point is salient for any activist or organizer: Most social movement participants get involved not with fully formed opinions that they're acting on, but amorphous or even skeptical views of the movement's aims. Personal ties are extremely important in attracting and retaining new members, and one of a movement's chief goals should be to educate and crystallize participants' views. This book fundamentally changed the way I think about movement building.

27. Piven, Frances Fox and Richard A. Cloward. *Poor People's Movements*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Piven and Cloward's classic book was the most provocative I read last year. In it, they argue there's a narrow window in which the marginalized can press their grievances on a usually hostile and exclusively capital-augmenting state. Disruption, not long-term organization, gets the goods. This is one of those books that makes you re-examine basic assumptions—in this case, about what it takes to effect social change.

28. Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

An exhaustive biography of the great civil rights organizer and thinker. Baker was out of the spotlight, and thus largely forgotten, by design. Fiercely committed to grassroots democracy, she counseled SNCC and always sought to empower the marginalized instead of accreting power herself. The leaderful, horizontalist structure that Occupy adopted is reminiscent of Baker's beloved participatory democracy, with all its advantages and disadvantages.

29. Rowbotham, Sheila, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright. *Beyond the Fragments*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981.

As the introduction states, "The authors are British, and to some extent their experience represents a slice of British or at least English left life, somewhat unfamiliar to Americans. However, they are also socialist feminists, and so their struggle is familiar to feminists in the United States." The authors are especially concerned with hierarchical organization in traditional Left parties and argue that "sisterhood" leavens stodgy, retrograde structures. *Beyond the Fragments* dovetails nicely with Evans' *Personal Politics*, released in the preceding year.

30. Stears, Marc. *Demanding Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Stears looks at a number of movements and thinkers through the 20th century: John Dewey, the New Left, Herbert Croly. This was the first time I encountered concepts like industrial democracy and participatory democracy.

31. Tilton, Tim. *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

It may seem peculiar to include a book on Swedish social democracy, but, with the necessary qualification that a country's social, political, and economic history impact the content and path of reform, American leftists have much to learn from their Swedish counterparts. What the Swedish labor movement built in the postwar period—through struggle in the workplace and in the political arena through the Social Democratic Party—is arguably the most just society humans have yet achieved. You can't think about progressive reform in the United States without an understanding of the Swedes' successes (and subsequent neoliberal reversals).

32. Students for a Democratic Society. *The Port Huron Statement*. 1962.

Early copy of the famous New Left statement, which captures both the idealism and naiveté of the student radicals. I first read this as an undergraduate in the midst of organizing against higher education privatization, and it was exhilarating. I was especially enamored with the calls for a society in which people participate in making the decisions that affect their lives—participatory democracy.

33. Wilcox, Leonard. *V.F. Calverton: Radical in the American Grain*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

Calverton has receded from the history books, but, in the 1920s and 30s, he was an important figure on the Left. An editor, writer, and intellectual, he hosted soirees at his Baltimore row house and founded the *Modern Quarterly*, a sort of forerunner to the more prominent *Partisan Review*. Calverton's Baltimore connection and his love of ideas make him a fascinating thinker and this book a stimulating read.

34. Zinn, Howard. *Disobedience and Democracy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1968.

Ostensibly a rebuttal to Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, this book assuaged any concerns I might have had about civil disobedience conflicting with democracy. Only with protest is there progress. The phrase, in reference to agitation, that has stuck with me most: "that healthy commotion that has always attended the growth of justice."

Wish List

1. Bartels, Larry. *Unequal Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

If capitalist democracy is an inevitably domesticated democracy, some capitalist democracies are still more responsive to popular opinion than others. Marshaling extensive empirical evidence, Bartels shows that Congress in the contemporary United States pays little attention to the preferences of the have-nots.

2. Payne, Charles. *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. Berkeley: University of California, 1995.

Widely regarded as one of the best books on organizing, Payne meticulously documents the struggle of SNCC to register voters and fight white supremacy in early 1960s Mississippi.

3. Poletta, Francesca. *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

The most in-depth study of democracy in American social movements I know of. Regrettably, I don't have a copy and haven't read it.

4. Reed, Adolph. *Class Notes*. New York: New Press, 2000.

A compendium of essays by the radical social critic. In an age of Left decline and an increasingly conservative Democratic Party, few are as brilliant as Reed in interrogating the failure of radical politics and the relationship between class and racial inequality.

5. Schweickart, David. *Against Capitalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

There are plenty of trenchant critics of capitalism, but here Schweickart, dismissing Marx's remark about not writing "recipes for cook-shops of the future," sketches out a plausible egalitarian alternative: market socialism, based on worker-directed firms.

6. Willis, Ellen. *The Essential Ellen Willis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014 (forthcoming).

For decades, the late Willis wrote perceptively and poetically about the radical Left, American culture, and politics. There are a handful of essay collections of hers, but this is the first that spans her entire corpus.