"THEY ALL TALK LIKE GODDAM BOURGEOIS:" Scientism and the Socialist GEORGE COTKIN* Discourse of Arthur M. Lewis

ONE EVENING IN 1913, radicals William English Walling, Emma Goldman, and "Big Bill" Haywood gathered at Mabel Dodge's celebrated salon to debate the relative merits of direct action, propaganda, and legislation as revolutionary tactics. At least one person present that evening responded negatively. After hearing each radical speak, the iconoclastic anarchist Hippolyte Havel exclaimed, "They all talk like goddam bourgeois." (1)

In his own fashion, Havel recognized identity in language and expression employed by bourgeois and radicals. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out, the formal structure of language and, most importantly, its conventions and symbols serve as the "webs of significance" through which individuals interpret reality and direct action. (2) In their choice of literary symbols and mode of presentation, the radicals present at Dodge's salon that evening unconsciously identified with the culture they were ostensibly trying to overthrow. Rather than devising a new cultural form, divorced from bourgeois conventions, pre-war socialists attempted to use the symbols and conventions of science in their discourse. In their turn to scientism, American radicals closely paralleled and built upon trends long apparent in bourgeois culture. American Marxists generally left the problematic nature of the scientific mode of expression unexamined. They ignored Humpty Dumpty's advice to Alice that the key to the successful usage of words is to be their "master."

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From Havel's standpoint, American Marxists and radicals had not mastered language conventions, but had, in fact, been enslaved by rhem. (3)

Marxism, wrote Roland Barthes, presents itself as the "language of knowledge." (4) Never was this more apparent than in the writings of turn-of-the-century American and European Marxist intellectuals. In their quest to make Marxism truly a "language of knowledge," Marxist theorists became increasingly scientistic in their exegesis. The scientistic mode of exposition molded both the structure and form for Marxist discourse and became embedded in the theory of the socialist Second International. (5) Analogies between social laws (Marxism) and the laws of the biological sciences (evolution) became the accepted literary conventions for Marxist theoreticians. In their turn to scientism, Marxist intellectuals followed the lead of Frederick Engels, who had, in his popular handbook Socialism: Utopian and Scientific, been careful to distinguish his and Marx's ideas as "scientific." Americans went Engels one better and referred to Marxism as "Modern Scientific Socialism." (6) For Marxists, science and socialism were the twin pillars supporting the edifice of modern knowledge. Louis Boudin, a leading American Marxist theorist, was not atypical when he exulted that "you cannot destroy [Marxism] without destroying all scientific knowledge of society." (7)

By 1905, scientistic modes of discourse flourished in American socialist circles on two levels: analogies and metaphors relating Marxism and science were ubiquitous; science was an acceptable subject matter for socialist writers. When the socialist Charles H. Kerr Company of Chicago decided in 1904 to publish the series "Library of Science for Workers," they made available to workers inexpensive and understandable volumes on socialism and science. (8)

The domination of scientism in mainstream socialist circles arose from a variety of sources. To be sure, Marxists wanted to capitalize on the prestige of science. Without a successful revolution as a reference point, Marxists employed the ideas of a "science of revolution" or a "science of historical development" to gain converts to the cause. Marxist intellectuals quickly recognized the rhetorical and practical value of science in socialist tracts. The editor of the "Library of Science for Workers" maintained that a knowledge of science would help the worker "to become a socialist." Said another socialist, scientific ideas are "weapons in the working class' arsenal." (9)

To see this turn to science as an episode in propaganda and rationalization is too simple and too undialectical. Marxist theorists

deeply believed in the truth and power of science; they turned to science as a symbol, self-serving to be sure, but a symbol which encompassed within its boundaries the beliefs they held sacred reason and progress. Like their European comrades, American Marxists felt drawn to science by the very weight of their enlightenment faith in the liberating power of reason and knowledge. American workers, "cobwebbed with delusions," according to Charles H Kerr, publisher of the "Library of Science" series, would be freed from dogma and superstition by a knowledge of science. They would then be ready to become socialists. (10) Additionally, American Marxists could not ignore the pull of science as a cultural given. A scientific way of viewing the world, of regulating one's personal habits, of deciding truth and value, were common themes in the style and thought patterns of middle-class educated Americans — a group from which the socialist movement drew many of its leading theorists. Not to be scientific conversely, was to be backward unenlightened, and invariably wrong — something Marxists no less than bourgeois sought to avoid. (11)

The work of socialist Arthur Morrow Lewis reveals the power, prestige, and problems of a scientistic mode of discourse; his writings embody the tenets of Second International Marxism. English-born, a moulder with only a common school education, the self-educated Lewis was a popular lecturer and publicist on science and socialism in America between 1900 and the first world war. (12) A thorough-going Marxist, Lewis accepted the economic interpretation of history, the inevitability of class struggle, and the hypotheses about surplus value and the impending breakdown of the capitalist system from internal contradictions. (13) Lewis traveled widely to earn his living as a lecturer on such topics as evolution, sociology, socialism, and religion. His Sunday morning lectures at the Garrick Theater in Chicago drew overflow crowds and became working-class events. Lewis' popularity among the masses of socialist workers makes him particularly appealing as a subject for those who wish to learn what inarticulate, grass-roots socialists believed in, or perhaps more correctly, turned out to hear. (14)

In his lectures and writings on science and socialism, Lewis made no claims for originality or insight; much of his lecture material on the conflict between religion and science, for instance, he borrowed, with acknowledgment, from the work of bourgeois liberals such as Andrew Dickson White, John W. Draper, and Edward Clodd. When discussing various theorists, Lewis preferred to "let the great thinkers speak for themselves," and his books are dominated by block quotes from original and secondary sources. Lewis did not see himself as a propagandist. He believed that his lectures actually

marked a departure in Marxist discourse. Whereas in the past, Marxist writings had "been purely of the propaganda order with a strong campaign flavor," Lewis now sought to broaden the horizons of already committed socialists. By organizing quotes and material, through interpretation and analysis, and by following "the method of the storyteller," Lewis hoped to prove that socialism was scientifically correct and to expand the Marxist's understanding of the world and its laws. (15)

While not an original thinker, Lewis was a representative one, and he typified the Marxist ideas displayed in America's leading socialist periodicals: The Appeal to Reason, Chicago Daily Socialist; New York Call, or International Socialist Review. Moreover, his works reveal the keynotes of nineteenth century thought, a faith in reason, in science, and in progress. Lewis' writings express these themes through an exposition based upon history and analogy, the Gods of discourse for the nineteenth century. (16)

Rhetorical analogy, the central mode of expression for scientistic writing, assumed large proportions in Lewis' works. The ubiquitous analogies revealed his monistic world view; with other Marxists, Lewis discerned no "dividing line in the animal kingdom between man and his lower relatives," the universe was but "one grand unity." (17) While he recognized dangers in relying upon analogies for analysis, Lewis nonetheless maintained that the analogies he drew between events in the natural world and in society proved that the world was "a living creature, evolving, and in process," helped establish the unity of knowledge, and demonstrated that law and order reigned supreme in the universe. (18)

Lewis centered his analogies around two comparisons: one joined the socialist and scientist as explorers in search of truth; another more important analogy he often used argued that the empirically defined and proven laws of the natural sciences bore a close relationship or were almost identical to the laws of social development detailed by Karl Marx.

Both the socialist and the scientist were praised as unbiased, heroic pursuers of truth, individuals upon whom the entrenched powers of society — whether theologian or businessman — heaped disdain and violence. Lewis recounted for his readers how Bruno, Galileo, and Copernicus had been persecuted but eventually proved correct. The theories of Marx, said Lewis, would be similarly justified. As had Engels, Lewis invoked Darwin's name in tandem with Marx's; they were the two great evolutionists of the nineteenth century; the "two great words of that century were Biology and Sociology." Lewis contended that just as Darwin had uncovered the laws of the natural world, so too had Marx discovered the science of society. At times

Lewis presented the discoveries of Marx and Darwin as co-equal; at other times he contended that Marxism, the science of society, was "heir to the labors of the giants who toiled in the fields of physical and biological science." Finally, Lewis joined Marxism and science through their common methodology. The scientific method, through empirical research, Lewis contended, uncovered laws that were central to scientific socialism. Because of their common concern with method, the socialist and the scientist were "the only men with great and vital truths to proclaim," or "the only men who command real audiences." (19)

Lewis defined Marxism as the application of the evolutionary theory to society, a view which he thought necessitated using analogies between the evolutionary process in the organic and social worlds. Following Herbert Spencer, Lewis contended that the social organism resembled the biological organism: both grew and multiplied, parts differentiated and individual units were interdependent, and the aggregate enjoyed greater longeviy than the unit. (20) Having satisfactorily proven that society is an organism, Lewis sought to demonstrate that each new discovery in the natural sciences supported the tenets of scientific socialism. His discussion of August Weismann's germ plasm theory and its relation to socialist science is typical of this use of the analogy.

Weismann had demonstrated that the Lamarckian notion of the inheritance of acquired characteristics was specious. As a result many socialist theorists, closet Lamarckians, worried that social improvements and culture could not be passed on from one generation to the next. Lewis, however, had no fear of the new theory and in fact correctly interpreted the general thrust of Weismann's views. (21) Lewis noted that if degrading conditions such as those found in the slums were passed on by heredity until they became fixed characters, then socialists would face a dilemma. But Lewis maintained that Weismann had by stressing the impact of environment upon the individual rather than upon the genetic structure, proved the benefits of manipulating the environment as a way of improving humanity. By not having inherited degenerate characteristics, the *lumpenproletariat*, Lewis argued, could be immediately elevated in a socialist environment. (22)

Similarly, Lewis found Hugo De Vries' mutation theory relevant to socialism. Lewis praised De Vries' theory of "spontaneous mutation" for dealing a death blow to the Lamarckians and for clearing up some lacuna in Darwinian science. After carefully placing De Vries in the Darwinian camp, Lewis detailed for his readers De Vries' primrose plant experiments and his theory about alternate periods of stability and mutability for organisms. All that

remained for Lewis was to relate the theory of mutation to accepted Marxian doctrines. (23)

Before the appearance of De Vries' work around the turn of the century, bourgeois Darwinians criticized socialist revolution as unsanctioned by natural law. They said change must occur in the social world as it did in the natural world, by slow and evolutionary procedures. Lewis contended that De Vries' experiments put to rest the notion that all changes in nature were gradual: "change takes place by sudden leaps," a new species might appear overnight. Lewis happily reported that "there is, therefore, no longer anything in biological science to contradict the Socialist position that a new society may be born of a sudden revolution. He constructed the extended analogy as follows:

Mutation, the savants tell us, runs in periods, alternating with periods of apparent stability. Then if we are not supported we are at any rate not contradicted, when we assert that in social development, periods of economic evolution, with apparent social stability, are followed by periods of social revolution when the entire social superstructure is transformed. (24)

As with other orthodox Marxists in the period 1901-1930, Lewis ignored the *mutationstheorie*'s "assumption that variation is random and evolution therefore undirected." Instead, he linked in his theory the content of science to social development to prove the inevitability and scientific possibility of socialist revolution. (25)

Not all American socialists accepted Lewis' interpretation of the mutation theory or recognized its value for "proving" the Marxian theory of revolution. On political grounds, some "reformist" socialists viewed the very invocation of the term "revolution" as undermining the Socialist Party of America's electoral strategy. With this perhaps in mind, right-wing socialist John Spargo attacked Lewis. But Spargo understood and developed certain aspects of the mutationstheorie which Lewis chose to overlook. Spargo cited the random quality of mutations and contended that not all mutations survived. He thought that while a socialist state might suddenly be born out of revolution, if its birth occurred before the forces of evolution had deemed its selection advisable, the socialist mutation would be crushed. Such a defeat might then impell the course of evolution backwards. Most importantly, this dispute centered only around Lewis' interpretation of the mutation theory. Mainstream socialists like Lewis, Spargo, Morris Hillquit, or Algie Simons did not question the viability of the analogical form of socialist discourse, they simply debated the implications of scientific theory for socialism. (26)

In addition to his use of analogies between socialism and science, a search for historical and scientific laws dominated Lewis' writings. As with other late nineteenth-century thinkers, "history was the . . . spirit in which all things had to be explained." (27) History cast a shadow which covered Lewis and his Marxism in righteousness. Lewis believed his history scientific, and above all else, evolutionary. As Darwin had brought order out of the chaos of nature, Marx had bequeathed to humanity, historical materialism, a true science of society. Darwin's evolutionary science and Marx's scientific socialism Lewis viewed as complementary; together they presented a unified vision of the universe. (28)

History was ordered and purposive; the scientific method, as applied to history by Marx and interpreted by Lewis, proved it. In Lewis' hands, the dialectic of history hardened into a deterministic mold. Lewis' analysis of the history of science read like a catalog of purposeful discovery — a straight and steady line of organic development: "From Thales to Linnaeus" he headlined one chapter in his Evolution: Social and Organic (1908). His subsequent chapters examined the working-out of evolutionary ideas in Lamarck, Darwin, Weismann, and De Vries. When discussing sociologists — the scientists of society — Lewis again followed the path of historical analysis. The result of his emphasis on history was not simply the presentation of an ordered procession of the history of minds in search of fundamental laws and truths; it was a vision of humankind's path as deterministic and progressive, and most significantly, scientifically discernible to the knowledgeable observer.

With other nineteenth century thinkers Herbert Spencer, Walter Bagehot, and Henry Maine — all of whom Lewis read — Lewis took a genetic view of history; all early ideas were "vague adumbrations of later truth." He transformed Heraclitus into a forerunner of Hegel, Xenophanes became an anticipator of Von Mohl's protoplasm theory. Secure in his intellectual ties to the past, Lewis found the very processes of history to be ascendent and necessary, directed by the logic of historical and scientific laws. (29)

Lewis demonstrated in his analysis of the history of scientific discovery that the laws of history were inexorable, unaffected by Carlylean great men and undiminished by doctrines about the exercise of free will. Considering the great man theory of scientific discovery a bugaboo to Marxist conceptions of the social predicates of scientific work, Lewis found most if not all scientific discoveries to have been dual: nearly simultaneously Kant and Laplace had uncovered the nebular hypothesis, Darwin and Wallace co-founded the law of natural selection, while Priestly and Lavoisier both claimed credit for the discovery of oxygen. Into this pattern of dual discovery,

Lewis inserted the names of Marx and Engels, discoverers of historical materialism, the science of society. (30)

The determinism which Lewis took to be the essence of any science of nature or society became the mode through which he expressed his socialist theory and practice. In common with other Marxists and with such outstanding bourgeois theorists as Brooks and Henry Adams, Lewis believed that the laws of science and history allowed one to penetrate "the secrets of the universe." (31) In the universe he described to his working-class audiences, all that happened was necessary — slavery, feudalism, capitalism — and all that would come was preordained and discoverable. By understanding where we had been, and armed with his science of society, Lewis maintained socialism the goal of world development. Lewis spoke of "reality" as an objective fact, historical and predictable. The evolution of reality was towards cooperation and the collective ownership of the means of production, according to Lewis. Since there was "nothing higher than reality," and since reality must triumph, Lewis remained sanguine about the future, especially since "socialism is in harmony with all reality." History would thus allow one "to anticipate the future." In his Hegelianism, then in vogue among American Marxists, Lewis indicated that reality unfolded as historical process with socialism the expression of emergent reality. (32)

Lewis proclaimed himself a revolutionary Marxist; he saw his task, in part, as exhorting the proletariat to organize and use their collective power to overthrow capitalism. Yet even as he invoked the words "class war," he eroded them by speaking of the working class' rise to power occurring because of "the inexorable economic evolutionary process which grinds capitalism . . . and moves majestically forward to the dawning of a new day." (33) At times Lewis mystified the historical process through an idealist version of history. He suggested that "full freedom" for the human race would be achieved only when the proletariat understood social law; "the key to human freedom must be sought in a knowledge of the science of society," said Lewis. He contended that such a knowledge of "the fundamental law of social development" would help to avert "premature" and unnecessary bloodletting such as occurred during the Paris Commune. Scientific knowledge, Lewis claimed, would "discourage riots and premature rebellions" while giving to class antagonisms an "organic shape" which would render them more meaningful. But defeats would at best only postpone the victory of the working class. "We wait until, in the evolutionary process, the hour of our release shall strike." Lewis did not speak of the working class striking or even acting to win their release as had Marx in his Theses on Feuerbach. When the bell tolled, as if by the magic of evolution, the working class would be emancipated. (34)

How a knowledge of science, recognition of the "organic shape" of class struggles would aid the working class was left unanalyzed by Lewis. There was little need for him to undertake this analysis since he had elevated and reified science itself into a force for revolution He seemed unaware of the work of other American Marxists such as Ernest Untermann who suggested, in embryonic form, that there might exist a proletarian and bourgeois science, that science might be class bound. (35) The truth of science, for Lewis, was internal and would "successfully withstand all opposition, while if false, in the end nothing could save it." While he did not see science as class bound, Lewis did view science as inherently revolutionary. Science had freed the bourgeoisie from the chains of feudalism. In like manner would science emancipate the working class from bourgeois oppression because the aim of science, according to Lewis, is "to conquer and abolish evil of all kinds." Science would become a "terrible weapon" in the hands of the working class. It would allow workers to understand the historical process and the concomitant laws of development. (36)

In Lewis' speeches and writings, the emotions, power, and indigenous organization of the working class were all insufficient vehicles for change unless bolstered by the power of science. With this conception, Lewis transformed the working class into a passive force. Education overtook revolution as the workers' key to salvation. "Ignorance, prejudice, and superstition," Lewis concluded, hindered the working class. To free the workers from these shackles, Lewis decided that he, as a lecturer, writer, and educator, "must work day and night for the dissemination of [scientific] knowledge and wait patiently for the harvest." (37)

Lewis did not specify how long workers would have to wait for that harvest, but he was sure it would come: "The capitalists of today can no longer hinder the process of social evolution, with its resulting march of ideas, than they can intercept gravitation or direct the tides." (38) Only on occasion, perhaps because of the revolutionary practice of the Industrial Workers of the World during this period, Lewis urged workers to organize along industrial lines and to engage in propagandizing activities. But his calls for working-class organization and militancy were only faint echoes of his main argument for scientific determinism. Lewis' scientism cloaked him in confidence for the future; it allowed him literally to write off the working class both theoretically and practically as the champions of their own emancipation. He replaced the working class as the motive force in history with a reified concept of social evolution as an independent force which would "close the first book of the history of the human

race" and then "open a new volume and begin to write the first chapter of human liberty." In his thought and language, Lewis took Marxian determinism to its ultimate lengths. He eliminated the working class as an active force for historical change. (39)

In the tradition of nineteenth century thought, Lewis' scientism was deterministic and given to the grand generalization. Yet while he was writing, philosophers and scientists were moving away from such conceptions towards a less grand and certainly less passive view of reality. Lewis and other mainstream socialists held to their conception of science and history. Lewis indicated no suspicion that history, reason, or science might be obsolete guideposts for modern man. In sum, Lewis and most of his socialist comrades did not undertake any revolt against formalism, but transformed science and history into icons, cultural myths of a high order. (40)

These myths, "the great and vital truths," which Lewis offered as central to socialism did not serve their purpose. As Philip Rieff has observed, "the power of any myth does not depend on its demonstrability as fact, but rather on the persuasiveness of the attitude it embodies, the further attributes it engenders, and the actions it encourages." (41) In this sense, Lewis' scientism failed as myth, for it transfigured what was supposed to be a revolutionary discourse into a passive one. Unlike Sorel, whose conception of the general strike as myth was pragmatic and revolutionary, (42) Lewis' mythology and language of science, based upon deterministic premises, communicated to the working class an accepting, scientific, and non-revolutionary materialism. His message, largely the ideological underpinning of the Socialist Party of America's theory, undermined revolutionary action. He and his colleagues turned the power and prestige of scientific socialism upon itself; this may help to explain, in part, why the European and American socialist movements failed to change the world. The intellectuals of these movements did not, as Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci might say, develop a "counter hegemonic" world view, a vision of reality built out of the organic experiences of the working class, a conception of reality that fundamentally challenged bourgeois notions of common sense, tradition, and authority. Lewis' vision of the world in both style and substance did little to undermine bourgeois intellectual and cultural hegemony. Perhaps Havel was right, Lewis and other radicals did "talk like goddam bourgeois." (43)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 4. Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, Lavers and Smith, trans. (New York, 1968), p. 23.
- 5. Second International Marxist thought has been categorized as "economist," "determinist," "vulgar materialist," and "orthodox." The classic critique of "orthodox Marxism" is Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness Livingstone, trans. (Cambridge, MA., 1971), pp. 1-26. On the scientific emphasis in Marxist philosophy, see Loren Graham, Science and Philosophy in the Soviet Union (New York, 1972), pp. 26-48; Diane B. Paul, "Marxism, Darwinism, and the Theory of Two Sciences," Marxist Perspectives 2 (Spring, 1979), pp. 116-43.
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- 11. The power and appeal of scientific culture in America is detailed by Charles Rosenberg, No Other Gods (Balt., 1976), pp. 1-21. Also, David A. Hollinger, Morris R. Cohen and the Scientific Ideal (Cambridge, MA., 1975), esp. pp. 58-61.
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- 13. These tenets are described as the gospel of Marxian socialists in America by Jesse Wallace Hughan, American Socialism of the Present Day (New York, 1911).
- 14. On the popularity of Lewis' lectures, see Chicago Daily Socialist I (Feb. 15, 1907); p. 3; (Oct. 26, 1907), p. 3; (Dec. 21, 1907), p. 4; (June 4, 1907), p. 3. Lewis' lectures were published in book form by the Kerr Publishing Company of Chicago. They were, with dates of publication and short titles in parentheses, as follows: The Art of Lecturing (1907, Art); Evolution, Social and Organic (1908, Evolution); Ten Blind Leaders of the Blind (1909, Ten Blind); Vital Problems in Social Evolution (1913, Vital Problems); Introduction to Sociology (1913, Introduction); and The Struggle Between Science and Superstition (1915, Struggle). Also published was a debate between Lewis and Clarence Darrow, Marx versus Tolstoy: A Debate (1911, Debate).
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- 16. Philosophers and historians as dissimilar as Michel Foucault and Maurice Mandelbaum make this point. Foucault, The Order of Things (New York, 1973), esp. pp. 217-49; Mandelbaum, History, Man & Reason (Balt., 1971).
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- 18. Lewis, Evolution, pp. 89-90; Introduction, p. 80.
- 19. Lewis, Vital Problems, pp. 22-23; Ten Blind, p. 175; Introduction, p. 9; Art, p. 28.
- 20. Lewis, Introduction, p. 81; Evolution, p. 141.
- 21. On the problems encountered by contemporary interpretors of Weismann, see Hamilton J. Cravens, *The Triumph of Evolution* (Phila., 1978), p. 38.
- 22. Lewis, *Evolution*, p. 78. For a socialist refutation of the theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, see Hermann Moellering, "Some Notes on a Weismann Lecture," *ISR* IX (Dec., 1908), pp. 362-65.
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- 24. Lewis, Evolution, pp. 94-95.
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- 27. Philip Rieff, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist (New York, 1979), p. 214.
- 28. Lewis, Introduction, p. 53.
- 29. Lewis, Evolution, pp. 7-14.
- 30. Lewis, Introduction, pp. 26-29.
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- 32. Lewis, Evolution, p. 6; Struggle, p. 184. The emergence of an Hegelian Marxism in America was furthered by the publication and dissemination of two volumes by Joseph Dietzgen, The Positive Outcome of Philosophy (Chicago), 1906) and Philosophic Essays (Chicago, 1907).
- 33. Lewis, Vital Problems, pp. 182, 192.
- 34. Ibid., pp. 6-7, 33, 71.

- 35. On Untermann, see George Cotkin, "Working-Class Intellectuals and Evolutionary Thought in America, 1870 to 1915," (Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1978), pp. 172-201; Paul, pp. 136-37.
- Lewis, Debate, p. 53; Evolution, pp. 19-23, 171; Struggle, p. 25; Introduction, p. 9.
- 37. Lewis, Vital Problems, p. 130; Evolution, p. 3. For an analysis of the "passive materialism" of European Marxists, see Mitchell, pp. 387-88.
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