Proletarianism Revisited

Barbara Foley

With the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the triumph of glasnost, and the end of the Cold War, the period of American historical perspectives is indicated by the resurgence of interest in the politically committed literature of the early 1930s. For many years, the works of the "proletarian" authors were not considered as serious as those of the "realists." However, the recent rediscovery of these authors has changed this perception.


These studies explore the role of literature in defining the political and social landscape of the 1930s, and the ways in which the works of authors like Saul Alinsky, Carl Sandburg, and others reflect the concerns of the time. They provide valuable insights into the historical context and the cultural context in which these works were produced.

The studies also discuss the influence of the Great Depression and the New Deal on the literary landscape of the 1930s, and the ways in which the works of these authors addressed the social and political issues of the time. They highlight the significance of these works in defining the "proletarian" movement and the role of literature in shaping the cultural and political landscape of the 1930s.

These studies are essential for anyone interested in the history of American literature and the cultural context in which it was produced. They provide a valuable perspective on the "proletarian" movement and its significance in defining the cultural and political landscape of the 1930s.
knowledge of the range of U.S. cultural production. Noting that in *Jesus Without Money* Gold “stressed the priority of cursing in ghetto discourse and helped establish its value as a literary resource” (40), Bloom demonstrates the embeddedness of Gold’s class politics in a distinct ethnic idiom. Directing attention to Freeman’s intellectual indebtedness not only to Marx but also to Arnold, Froust, and Eliot, he reads the autobiographical *An American Testament* as a profoundly modern work whose “historical resonance ... depends on the psychological and rhetorical dissonances that it fails to resolve” (86). Kalaidjian reads Langston Hughes’s “Good Morning, Revolution!” as a “splicing of the [of] such blues masterworks as Leadbelly’s ‘Good Morning Blues’ with the provocative rhetoric of revolutionary proletuclit” (102-03). Interspersing his study with a wealth of reproduced posters, paintings, and book covers, Kalaidjian persuasively demonstrates the complex intersections of sexuality, racial consciousness, and class-based labor politics in the literature and iconography of the Harlem Renaissance. Staub juxtaposes familiar texts such as *Black Elk Speaks* with little-known works such as William Raigalno Benson’s “The Stone and Kelsey ‘Massacre’” and provides a series of persuasive readings of the key role played by voice in early twentieth-century “fact-based” texts. Analyzing the complex narrative apparatus of *Yonnondio*, he reads Olsen’s text as “a narrative about being a novel about the uses of voice to persuade readers to care more about the American underclass” (131). Taking issue with the fashionable notion that professional writers cannot and should not “speak for” the “subaltern,” he demonstrates the political and epistemological self-consciousness of Depression-era texts aspiring to speak simultaneously for, about, and through oppressed people.

Finally, the studies by Kalaidjian, Staub, and Bloom to varying degrees defend the left-wing political commitments of the writers and schools they discuss, thus offering a brief for *critique engage*. What Kalaidjian praises the Reed Clubs and other “historical avant-gardes” for “regarding groups, rather than individuals, as the productive sources of literary expression” (51). Staub attends to being “moved[...]. greatly” by the “integrity of the struggles and the largesse of the social visions” articulated in the texts he treats (18-19). Beyond, moreover—counteracting the widespread critical practice of separating favored writers from their left-wing commitments—that “representing the voices of the persecuted and marginalized” was “a central task for CP writers” and that Olsen’s achievement was “embedded in Communist concerns” (112-13). Bloom offers an enthusiastic assessment of his subjects’ revolutionary politics and “shared passion for justice” (156). Rejecting the routine view of Gold as “a bully and a vulgarian” (14), Bloom applauds Gold’s anti-racism and demonstrates “how much critical irony and dialectical skepticism inform Gold’s sympathy for the marginal and oppressed” (60). Moreover, he inveighs against the tendency of present-day academics to dismiss Freeman’s 1930s Marxism as “vulgar,” arguing that Freeman’s “postparty liberalism” was more deserving of the label (75, 106). Depression-era literary radicalism has found some passionate and articulate defenders.

If the current revisionary work on the 1930s can offer such useful literary-historical, textual, and political insights, it might be asked, why look a gift horse in the mouth? Given the strident and dismissive anti-communism that has until recently shaped discussion of the radical 1930s, isn’t it a sign of progress that smart young critics are saying interesting new things about the committed literature of the early twentieth-century United States? As I hope to point out, even these important and illuminating new studies are to one extent or another compromised by their adherence to a postmodernist politics that resuscitates, albeit in altered form, many of the uninterrogated premises about the left that shaped the pre-*perestroika* discourse over proletarianism. Moreover, this postmodernist politics misreads the meaning and particularity of much Depression-era literary radicalism, and—despite its presumed distrust of totalizing schemes—implies a new “master narrative” upon literary history that occludes even as it reveals.

While all three critics offer revisionary readings of the 1930s, they appear to have accepted without adequate scrutiny much of the inherited narrative about the relationship between U.S. communism and the cultural left. Bloom is evidently in sympathy with a number of features of Gold’s and Freeman’s radicalism, but he has virtually nothing positive—or, more crucially, new—to say about the Communist movement with which these writers aligned themselves. Bloom, of course, entitled to hold a negative view of the Communist party. But his judgments must nonetheless be based on accurate historical information. Is Bloom justified in claiming that Gold engaged in a “falsification of historical facts” when he asserted that the old and Freeman in *An American Testament* became most vehement in denouncing the Zhadanovist “eagerness to dynamite the past” and in affirming the Trotskyist view of gradual cultural change” (89), the evolutionist view he endorsed was in fact not distinctive to Trotsky, but by the mid-thirties had come to be endorsed by almost all the leading Soviet and American theorists. Above all, as I point out in my recent book on 1930s literary radicalism, to declare that the “party-line view of art” was just that art was “a political weapon in the future social war” (75) is an oversimplification of the CP’s quite complex and finally unresolved conception of the role of art in the class struggle. Precisely because this study has so many valuable things to say about two writers...
who were among the most important literary Communists of the 1930s, a more historically informed treatment of the movement that shaped them and that they helped to shape is needed.

Bloom also tends to assume in advance points that in fact require independent proof and argument. At many points in *Left Letters*, Bloom makes reference to a Communist party "orthodoxy" that sought to impose a crudely propagandistic view of literature upon left-wing writers and critics. Freeman, Bloom claims, in contrast to "the Communist party and its more orthodox adherents—Mike Gold, for example" embraced an "antinomian Marxism" and an "antidogmatic aesthetic." Not only is no "orthodox" critic other than Gold mentioned anywhere in the book, but this formulation argues by innuendo and trope alone: rather than factually supporting the implied charge of party authoritarianism, Bloom just characterizes the party as a theocracy and the presumably maverick Freeman as a dissenter. Moreover, even though Bloom makes the important point that Stalinism should "no longer [be] a demonizing name for mass murder or a reproach to the integrity of nonviolent leftisms" (6), the term is at various points invoked as if it requires no historical or political glossing. Discussion of both the shortcomings and the achievements of the 1930s left will not go forward as long as "Stalinism" remains unpacked.

Indeed, a good deal of the language in *Left Letters* operates by drawing upon uninterrogated anti-communist premises. The text on the inner flap of the cover—presumably approved by the author—reads: "This valuable book complements efforts to recover 'proletarian' authors from the shipwreck of party-line writing." In order for this quite dramatic statement to be justified, the book would have to demonstrate that there was such a thing as "party-line writing" and that it was a disaster. Along similar lines, the "positions" of the Communist party are referred to as "often procrastinate and unpredictably varying" (11): if this is true, let's learn how, where, when. The "contestation" that Bloom admires in *Jews Without Money* is said to articulate "not simple partisan animus and ideological assertion but rather dialogic contestation" (29)—a binary opposition implying that partisanship and assertion are based in anger and dogmatism, while the refusal to take sides is a sign of intellectual openness. The result of such statements and formulations is to locate Gold and Freeman in a peculiar space, partly complicitous with totalitarianism and partly apart from it—rather than to see their contradictions as situated squarely within the quite complicated theory and practice of the left, where, I believe, it belongs.

Staub clearly approves of the project of socially committed 1930s writing, and in his chapter on Olsen he makes fine use of primary source materials such as the *Western Worker* and *Working Woman*. Even he, however, makes a number of unsubstantiated claims about the left and at times argues from premise rather than evidence. He seems to have accepted without demurral, for example, the commonplace that the Communist movement of the early 1930s—the so-called Third Period—was "sectarian" in its adherence to the slogan, "Class Against Class." This may or may not be true, but it certainly requires some argument: simply to brand as "ultra-left" the call for "throwing out the government and instituting a workers' state" (115, 117) is not sufficient. (The problems currently facing nations that presumably avoided the "ultra-left" course, from South Africa to El Salvador, may suggest that at least more than a dismissive label is required.) Staub also accuses the Communist party of bad faith without sufficient evidence. For example, in his discussion of the "Sefpat to Andy" column published in the *Young Worker*, in which the Communist Pat routinely explains leftist politics to the naive Andy, Staub complains that "Andy (after four months) ended just as stupidly as he began, and Pat remained locked into his own role as know-it-all" (117). Here a discursive convention of didactic dialogue going back at least to Plato—the intellectual opacity of the tutee, the wisdom of the tutor—is simply equated with party "manipulation" (118).

While Staub makes the very important point, moreover, that *Yondondio* "is best understood as an extension of—and not a break from—concerns and dilemmas expressed in the Communist press of the thirties" (138), he claims that "to the considerable extent that *Yondondio* self-consciously engages with the dilemmas of how best to represent reality for the purpose of persuasion—and that it exploits its own dissatisfaction with existing methods—Olsen’s narrative goes much further than other CP literature" (131). While *Yondondio* is indeed a very fine text, the more relevant body of "CP literature" with which it invites comparison is not left-wing journalism but the genre of the proletarian novel. When Staub applauds Olsen’s use of dialogue "subtly to embed instructive political point[s]" (133), for example, he overlooks the fact that the use of mentor characters in dialogue was a hallmark didactic convention of the proletarian novel. Moreover, Staub’s claim to have invented a new term, "persuasive literature," to describe books like *Yondondio* ignores the consuming debates over both proletarianism and "propaganda" that occupied so many writers and critics of the 1930s (112). If the term "CP literature" is taken to include the Communist-influenced proletarian novel, it is questionable that Olsen "goes much further."

For Staub as for Bloom, the laudable impulse to offer recuperative readings of 1930s radical writers is hampered by an uninterrogated rhetoric of suspicion regarding the organized left. "Stalinism" apparently "distorted the vision of [thirties communists]" (11)—though we do not learn why or how. The party line was—seemingly by its very nature—"univocal" (114). Party members engaged in organizing were trying "to convert… other workers" (115) (the implied religious motif, again). The "Pat Sex to Andy" column was "inten[t] on slamming home a CP line" (118)—why not just "articulating"? A "political program" is something that is "pushed" (137)—why not just "proposed"? Olsen is said to have been "[f]uriously aware of the futility of social[ist] realism"—an interesting claim, and perhaps valid, but accompanied by no discussion of "social[ist] realism," no rationale for proclaiming it futile,
and no presentation of Olsen's views on the subject. In short, *Voices of Persuasion*, for all the brilliance of its insights into the workings of voice in left-wing discourse, denies the voice of the organized left a fair hearing.

Of the three studies under consideration here, Kalaidjian's is the most explicit in its criticism of the organized left: one of its author's central arguments is that CP-sponsored proletarian culture was doomed to failure because of its adherence to a "classist" politics that fetishes production and denied difference. This is a provocative argument; if valid, it suggests fundamental flaws in the entire project of the 1930s left. But it needs to be supported by a careful analysis of actual positions espoused by leftist critics and commentators. Kalaidjian applauds the "anti-Stalinist" Philip Rahv and William Phillips (Wallace Phelps) of the *Partisan Review* for "showcasing sophisticated modernist aesthetics that surpassed the kind of 'leftist' social realism featured in *New Masses*" (199). As James Murphy has recently pointed out, however, this dichotomy seriously misrepresents the aesthetic positions held by both Stalinists and anti-Stalinists, who during the thirties overlapped in their estimates of experimental modernism. Kalaidjian also oversimplifies the history of Soviet aesthetics, noting that "[t]he tendency of Soviet-style proletcult under Stalin was to reduce the diversity of ideological representation to socialist realism's focus on the new industrial forces of production" (170). In the USSR, proletcult (which predated the Stalin era) was supplanted by socialist realism only in the mid-1930s. Moreover, proletcult manifested a fascination with the liberatory qualities of the machine from its very inception in the early 1920s: Stalinism cannot be exclusively equated with worship of productive forces (Fitzpatrick).

Furthermore, Kalaidjian characterizes the CP as "repressive" toward black culture, exhibiting contempt for the black "vernacular" and "fail[ing] to credit African-Americans either with their own nativist traditions or a capacity to assume vanguardist roles in forging a visionary socialist culture" (66). While party organs did indeed attack "petty bourgeois nationalism" and criticize the class content and implication of various Harlem Renaissance texts, they also celebrated the "nativist traditions" of the black peasantry and proletariat, as exemplified in work songs, songs of protest, and spirituals (Kelley). Moreover, the CP actively supported the "vanguardist" work of revolutionary black writers such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who made extensive use of vernacular modes.

*American Culture Between the Wars* also employs anecdotes in such a way as to give an essentially a prioristic argument the feel of concreteness. Kalaidjian makes reference to the story—frequently invoked in anti-party accounts of the 1930s left—of Kenneth Burke's being "anathematized by the party faithful" (125) at the 1935 American Writers Congress for proposing that the left substitute the figure of "the people" for that of "the worker" in its "revolutionary symbolism." The episode, in Kalaidjian's view, "remains one of America's most memorable episodes of party parochialism" (14). Kalaidjian fails to mention, however, that—as Bloom in fact points out—Malcolm Cowley, a firsthand witness to the episode, considered Freeman's behavior "mild, even conciliatory," and, more importantly, that Burke went on to give a highly favorable account of the conference in *The Nation* (80-81). Kalaidjian also recounts at some length the saga of Diego Rivera's relationship with the U.S. left, remarking that Rivera's being lambasted as a Trotskyite in 1932 was proof of "Communist xenophobia" (14). The New York John Reed Club "fell in step with the party line" and, in a public meeting where Rivera was "excoriated," apparently "succumbed to a kind of mob psychology" (112). When he recounts various party members' defense of Rivera a few years later when the Rockefeller's refused to display his revolutionary murals in the new Rockefeller Center, however, Kalaidjian asserts that this activity was undertaken by "the New York counterculture" (122). Presumably these supporters were being not Communists but artists in their later support of Rivera. In the Burke and Rivera anecdotes, Kalaidjian purports to be invoking concrete specificity but in fact tailors "evidence" to suit guiding assumptions.

While Kalaidjian is of course entitled to make whatever criticisms he likes of the CP at times he substitutes premise-laden language for argument. Without saying why, Kalaidjian refers to the entire "Soviet experiment in socialism" as "seven decades of mismeasure" (17). The Third-Period analysis of heightened class contradictions is "dogmatism" (59). Party theorist V. J. Jerome is an "ideologue" (205). The great majority of CP critics bear the epithet "orthodox." The fact that a revolution did not take place in the 1930s United States is presented as the "failure . . . of the proletarian messiah to arrive in the promised land" (134). Kalaidjian claims to offer a historically specific argument about the causes of the "failure of American leftist" (134), but verbal formulations such as these assume rather than prove the point.

I have commented at some length on the representation of the left in the three books under examination here in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of their anti-communist assumptions. While their authors have adopted fresh approaches to otherwise ignored aspects of 1930s cultural radicalism, all three books reproduce the old saws about Communist manipulation, dogmatism, and bad faith to a disappointing extent. A genuinely revisionary approach should be grounded in a historiographical method that takes nothing for granted and painstakingly scrutinizes the entire available archive; its standards of rigor should be identical with those deployed in other arenas of scholarship. That even scholars bent on rehabilitating Depression-era left-wing culture cannot fully relinquish the categories and tropes of anti-communist discourse indicates not a failure of these critics' intelligence or integrity but the continuing hold of anticommunism in the culture at large—a hold all the more noteworthy because the beast has presumably been vanquished.
What bears further investigation, however, is the extent to which specifically postmodernist values and assumptions are complicit in these studies’ dismissive representations of the 1930s organized left. For careful reading reveals that the qualities for which writers and artists are valorized, and in which “orthodox” left cultural activity was presumably lacking, are the standard postmodernist virtues: linguistic self-consciousness, locality, dialogism. The favored figures in all three books emerge as postmodernists *avant la lettre*, variously anticipating the full flowering of ludic self-reflexivity in our time.

There is nothing inherently wrong with sending writers from an earlier period through the mesh of contemporary critical concerns; indeed, it is through such maneuvers that literary history is rewritten and that useful new theoretical paradigms and textual interpretations emerge. But this exercise runs the risk of producing one-sided and predictable textual readings and of imposing a different—but not necessarily better—master narrative upon cultural history. In the case of 1930s literary radicalism, these problems are compounded by the danger that the old and familiar forms of anti-communism regain life and energy precisely because they look like something new.

In the books under examination here, the discovery of postmodernist traits such as centering and multivocality can often exaggerate a text’s self-interrogating qualities and downplay its commitment to an unambiguous (though not necessarily simpleninded) class partisanship. Throughout *Voices of Persuasion* Staub keeps in view the important thesis that the “self-reflexive[er] grasp[es] of the problems of representation” in 1930s documentarism enables “persuasive readings of social conditions” (18): he does not proclaim reality a mere text, even if it is textually known. Nonetheless, his reading of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as “repeatedly and obsessively undermin[ing] its author’s authority to write the very text we read”—as featuring “its own failure as a documentary” to be “one of the book’s central subjects” (34-35)—unduly privileges, in my view, the text’s self-reflexive over its mimetic effects. Even as it scrutinizes its own capacity fully to reflect the reality of exploitation and displacement that it strives to capture in word and picture, *Famous Men* does quite successfully replicate its object of representation. Bloom, in his laudable eagerness to rescue *Jews Without Money* from the label of crude party propaganda, overstates the importance of the “dialogic encounter . . . between the two Jewish discourses of justice and redemption” in the text (31). Since, in Bloom’s reading, Gold’s “party-line Marxism” is treated as epistemologically identical to his “messianic Judaism,” he cannot accept the primacy that Gold assigns to Marxism at the narrative’s end and concludes that Gold’s narrator “rejects the lesson of his own iconoclastic and demystifying narrative, the antimessianic skepticism he exercised toward his Jewish heritage” (28). A Jewish *bricoleur*, it would appear, can only with difficulty call for communist revolution.

Kalaidjian would rescue Edwin Rolfe from the charge of “vulgar Marxism” by asserting that, in his poem “Credo,” Rolfe “moved beyond the impasse of Communist orthodoxy” by articulating a consciousness that was “less mimetic than deconstructive . . . at once asserting and placing *sous rature* his [political] faith in political commitment” (56-57). I cannot help wondering what Rolfe—whose recently published poems reveal him to have participated in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and gone on to write angry denunciations of state repression in the 1950s—would have made of such a reading. For Bloom and Kalaidjian, the invocation of a postmodernist paradigm reinforces inherited tenets of anti-communism by associating, on the one hand, a stylifying monologism with the forthright assertion of class and/or revolutionary partisanship and, on the other, an energetic dialogism with skepticism about political partisanship.

The embrace of postmodernist premises also can produce a reframing of literary and cultural history that, while usefully pointing out that proletarianism did not represent a historical dead end, ends up gutting 1930s radicalism of its distinctive allegiance to a class-based revolutionary politics. Bloom, observing that “Gold’s and Freeman’s literary left Kulturkampf! . . . rests on as much as it resists the bohemian modernism associated with the twenties” (117), concludes that, “like the canonic modernists they challenged and emulated,” Gold and Freeman were finally incapable of “dissolving the opacity of history and . . . transcending the given even rhetorically” (134). Were he to grant greater importance to the left-wing politics that guided Gold’s and Freeman’s best work in the 1930s—and that sustained Gold, if not Freeman, to the end of his life—Bloom might not so readily conclude that the two writers “failed” and that, moreover, this “failure” is best understood as inextricably intertwined with that of high modernism. Kalaidjian makes an important observation when he correlates proletarian poetry with the Language poets’ embrace of “postindustrial” values and modes of representation. But when this kind of “reading back” results in an interpretation of *Popular Front* culture as a site of polyphony and difference, a “lost horizon of alliance politics” (56), as much is lost as is gained. For in spite of the liberal rhetoric of democracy and inclusion that accompanied the Popular Front, it was a movement sponsored by a left for which the “bottom line,” if you will, was class: the purpose in promoting Popular Front culture was to weld the sense of class identity precluded by U.S. racial and ethnic divisions. In this reframing of U.S. cultural history, proletarianism is important not for its revolutionary class outlook (which Kalaidjian sees as “thoroughly discredited” by the “unfolding of postwar history” [215]), but for its anticipation of the “broader multicultural discursive field” (252) that would open up once cultural radicalism relinquished its “classist” bias.

Staub, to his credit, refuses to treat 1930s documentarism as a literary or political “failure”: the aura of inevitable doom and defeat surrounding so many discussions of 1930s literary production is entirely absent from
his study. But if his stress on the politics of voice provides sharp insights into the parodic edge of a text like Mules and Men, his treatment of Olsen as a precursor of 1980s linguistic self-reflexivity ends up giving somewhat short shrift to what is distinctively proletarian in Yomondot. To proclaim this text "a narrative about being a novel about the uses of voice to persuade readers to care more about the American underclass" turns the text's method into its rationale. Olsen was less interested in giving speech to the silenced or in alerting middle-class readers to injustice (though these certainly were concerns of hers) than in helping proletarians achieve a new class consciousness, one that would permit them to use their hands to "wipe out the whole thing, the whole goddam thing, and [allow] a human . . . [to] be a human, for the first time on earth" (qtd. in Staub 138). Speech and voice, voice and hand, are mutually implicated for Olsen in a way fundamentally alien to the more exclusively textual radicalism of a de Certeau.

In my view, there are three features of postmodern theory that inform these books and leave them particularly vulnerable to an uncritical absorption of inherited anti-communist discourse. First, an antipathy to the totalizing and the universal, and a correlative embrace of the local and the partial, present formidable barriers to critics attempting to come to terms with the Communist politics guiding much of literary proletarianism. For the 1930s radicals construed class not as one subject position among many, a site of difference, but as a comprehensive frame of reference from which to analyze both the objective movement and structure of capitalist society and its positioning of individuals and classes. Moreover, for many of these writers, adherence to a class analysis meant joining the Communist party and submitting themselves to its collective discipline. These are pretty hard pills to swallow for critics schooled in the necessity for dispersal, heterogeneity, and site-specific discourse and practice.

Bloom, we have seen, confronts this dilemma by treating Gold's Jewishness as a subject position qualifying his Communist and by positioning both Gold and Freeman as complex and interesting largely to the extent that they depart from party "orthodoxy." Staub confirms Olsen's particularity by asserting that her self-reflexivity enables her to "get much farther than other CP literature." Kaalidjan articulates a full theoretical rationale for his rejection of class-based politics by proclaiming his approval of the New Social Movements and embracing the post-Marxist critique of Leninist Communism offered by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. He argues at some length that the Old Left's central error was its failure to recognize the capacity of consumer capital to coopt any and all social movements in its domain and to grasp the correlative necessity of abandoning class analysis and waging Gramscian "wars of position" in the realm of vernacular and popular culture. In this context, he asserts the irreducibility of the particular by continually asserting the nonassimilability of gender and race to the rubric of class analysis. Thus the poet Muriel Rukeyser is said to have "moved beyond Soviet-style proletcult" by virtue of her feminist representation of the nation's "local and liminal spaces" (163-65). Langston Hughes is said to have "finess[e]d" the "reduction of socialist realism" by "splic[ing] nuanced vernacular signs" throughout his class-conscious poetry (101). In Kaalidjan's view, the main problem with the Old Left, both political and epistemological, was its "classism"—a term that he takes to signify simultaneously oppression and a reductionist privileging of class as subject position (see 12, 104, 200, 213, 246, 253). Hence he can use the term to refer both to the elitist aesthetic predilections of the Guggenheim and the misguided politics of 1930s Marxist critics. That the main project of proletarianism, the arousal of revolutionary class consciousness, should be distilled in an adjective connoting at once ambiguity and opprobrium indicates the profound gulf between Kaalidjan's politics and those of the 1930s writers he treats.

Second, postmodernism's preoccupation with discourse as the privileged site of contestation entails a conception of emancipatory practice that is fundamentally alien to the politics of many 1930s left-wing writers. For if liberation consists in overturning dominant discourses, then textual "subversion" is the strategic order of the day. What Bloom admires most about Gold's writing is its "subversive mastery of the culture he challenged" (66) and its "open-ended portrayal of the "dialogic contestation" informing lower East Side Jewish life. It is Gold's "playful feeling for the spoken word" that above all refutes the "misrepresentation[n] of Gold as a crude anti-intellectual hack" (21). To the extent that he privileges Gold's playfulness over his left-wing politics, however, Bloom has difficulty reconciling himself to the coexistence of the ludic and the party-line Gold in a single body. Kaalidjan, who uses "subversive" as his principal term of approbation throughout his book, praises Kenneth Fear's parodic poetry for its "subversive reinscription of the "rhetoric of capital" (205). Fear's "sophisticated attention to the ideological work of advanced consumer capitalism" enabled him to contest "party ideologues who held to classist representations of the proletariat": he "was not so much a propagandist of Communist humanism, although there is some of that in his work, but, more radically, a debunker of the commodity form as it pervades modern society" (200-03). To Kaalidjan, a text subverting the discourses legitimating commodification clearly performs more revolutionary work than one arousing class consciousness.

Finally, much postmodernist discourse has trouble coming to terms with 1930s literary leftism because it offers, at bottom, an essentially liberal paradigm for understanding social relations. To be sure, postmodernist critics routinely evince a certain radical panache in their talk about subversion and dialogism. (It is curious, by the way, how Bakhtinian dialogism, which situates contradiction in the realm of discourse, has displaced Marxist dialectics in so much postmodernist textual radicalism). But if all totalizing modes of explanation, including Marxism, are oppressive, reductive, and occulsive of difference, then
there remains, in my view, little space for anything other than a rewarmed liberal pluralism committed to piecemeal reformism and coalition politics.

While articulated in up-to-date language, quite traditional liberal premises underwrite many of the political and historical judgments embedded in the three books we have been examining. Kalafrican, identifying with the Partisan Review tradition of literary anti-Stalinism, purports to make a left critique of the Old Left's monologic bureaucratism and stabs his text with approving references to Antonio Gramsci's notion of a "war of position" against capitalism. But Kalafrican's clear preference for the Popular Front over the Third Period is based on a fairly straightforward rejection of the politics of class against class. Moreover, as his remarks on Fearing indicate, he appears to think it more important to contest capitalism's capacity to reify than its imperative to exploit: the sphere of consumption, not production, is for Kalafrican the crucial site of struggle. Stauff also feels more at ease with the Popular Front than the Third Period and chastises early 1930s Communists for "resist[ing] all cooperation with democratic or reform activities" (122). But it all depends on how you tell it; Third Period Communist strategy can as readily be described as a principled reluctance to engage in the revisionist class collaboration to which it fatally succumbed—both in the United States and internationally—during the Popular Front era. More significantly, however, Stauff's liberalism shapes his reading of Olsen as "engage[d] with politically persecuted and marginalized peoples" (112) and bent upon "persuad[ing] readers to care more about the underclass" (131). This formulation downplays much of Olsen's purpose as a proletarian writer who saw the working class as not "marginalized" but exploited and who aimed to arouse not primarily pity but anger. Even Bloom, who admires Gold and Freeman for their revolutionary élan and sharply queries the pseudoradicalism of much present-day academic Marxism, is skeptical of exactly that feature of his writers—the "orthodox" side—that sets them apart from contemporary textual radicalism. Moreover, in his counter to the misuse of the term "Stalinism," Bloom holds up "nonviolent leftisms" as the legitimate alternative. Perhaps it is unfair to characterize Bloom as a liberal if he says that he is not one. But the giveaway term here—no doubt welcome to some, but problematic, I admit, to me—is "nonviolent." I remain unconvinced that one can claim the label of "leftist" without seeing the role of force—that is, class struggle which turns violent at times—as crucial in historical transformation.

It is indeed useful to leaven the contemporary celebration of dispersal, particularity, and subversion with a consideration of the ways in which the prevalent discourses of postmodernism may not offer a "way out" (to resurrect a slogan of the 1930s), but instead, as Fredric Jameson and David Harvey have suggested, may structurally replicate and ideologically sustain advanced monopoly capitalism. Harvey in particular offers the important caution that the valorization of locality, rather than substituting liberatory difference for reductive totality, reproduces on the level of consciousness global capital's structural drive to fragment its constituent labor markets. If this is the case, then postmodernist discourse may not so much offer a critical paradigm for countering reification as constitute a symptomatic accommodation to it. And if this is the case, we may wish, rather than hearkening to the postmodernist drummer, to look back to the 1930s—not for anticipatory traces of the culture of bricolage that has come to its questionable maturity in our present, but for suggestions on how to create our future (albeit in our own way, in our own time) along lines imagined in the past.

Note

1 Gramsci, who like Bakhtin is invoked with ritual regularity in postmodernist theory, is usually passed over as a leader in the (Stalinist) Third International and is read solely as an advocate of strategic practices abjuring direct confrontation with the capitalist state and relying on "burrowing from within." This reading makes him a comfortable "Marxist" ally for many present-day academic radicals but occludes much of the antifascist political practice that sent him to the prison from which he wrote about the war of position.

Works Cited


