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Writing up the Working Class: The Proletarian Novel in the U.S.

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Although fiction about the working class written from a left-wing perspective has been produced in the United States since the beginnings of industrialism, the term "proletarian novel" is generally seen to pertain to the years immediately surrounding the Great Depression, 1929-1941, when close to a hundred texts of this kind were published. During the Cold War, the reigning conservative critical consensus branded proletarian fiction—and proletarian literature generally—as aesthetically bankrupt and crudely polemical. In recent years, however, there has been a revival of interest in this body of literature. Although the postmodernist "war on totality" retains many premises of Cold War anticommunism and continues adversely to shape commentary on the cultural movement of the Old Left, a number of scholars are returning to the archive and reading proletarian literature in new and exciting ways.

In order to appreciate both the achievements and the limitations of proletarian literature, it is necessary to clear the ground of various mistaken assumptions about left-wing literary production in the 1930s. Although U.S. proletarian writers have been lambasted for subservience to "directives" issued from the USSR, they actually borrowed
from the Soviets but defined their own project largely in their own terms. "Socialist realism," for example, never caught on among the Americans. Moreover, although proletarian novelists frequently opted for conventionally realistic narrative modes, many on the literary left saved their greatest praise for experimental forms, such as the collective novel. They may not have generally admired T. S. Eliot—whom they dismissed as a reactionary aesthete—but they hardly envisioned their project as alien to modernism.

If U. S. proletarian writers were neither taking orders from Moscow nor handing over modernism to the art-for-art's-sake's, neither were they, as a group, as "left" as has often been supposed. Most of the literary proletarians repudiated the view that art should be propaganda: although there was a certain amount of talk about literature as a weapon in the class struggle, a close scrutiny of debates over literature and politics carried on the pages of New Masses, Partisan Review, and the organs of the John Reed Clubs reveals that, if anything, many on the U. S. literary left endorsed a cognitivist as opposed to an agitational aesthetic. Discussions about how to define proletarian literature—by subject matter? authorship? audience? leftist political perspective?—reveal that many left-wing writers and critics felt uneasy with didacticism and preferred literary strategies that seamlessly blended politics with narrative. While to a degree such critics simply wanted to avoid clumsy writing, they also accepted without interrogation the bourgeoisie aesthetic premise that a text should show, not tell.

This aesthetic premise in turn reflected various reformist tendencies in the larger political program and outlook of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), particularly in the post-1935 period of the Popular Front. Just as leftists should not talk too insistently about revolution, bringing in Communist ideas "from the outside" in the Leninist sense, so should literary texts not too insistently jar their readers with political analyses—conveyed through speeches, mentor characters, or even narratorial voice—coming "from outside" the experiences of literary characters. Even though the literary radicals—like 1930s Marxists generally—wanted to call for the "better world" of classless egalitarianism, they were in practice hesitant about how best to do so.

The last bit of ground-clearing needed before one approaches U. S. proletarian literature has to do with issues of gender and race. Critics of the left—then and now—frequently charge that Marxism—in both theory and practice—precludes appreciation of the special oppression of women and people of color. The record of the 1930s left with regard to both questions—the "Woman Question" and the "Negro Question"—is somewhat mixed. Left-wing iconography often gendered the proletariat as musculluly masculine: Communist doctrine inadequately theorized the unpaid labor of women in the home. Yet the U. S. left celebrated women’s participation in the class struggle, promoted birth control and abortion rights, and held up altered gender relations in the USSR—complete with the abolition of formal marriage—as exemplary. With regard to antiracist struggle, the CPUSA’s record is less ambiguous: without doubt the party was the leading antiracist force in the U. S. during the 1930s. The vigorous campaigns against lynching and Jim Crow and for sharecropper unions in
the South; the advocacy of multiracial unity in organizing the CIO—these and other stances revealed a fundamental commitment to antiracist egalitarianism. The contradictory coexistence of the support for class-based multiracial unity with the call for Negro self-determination in the South’s Black Belt, however, produced a nationalist ambiguity that would muddy theoretical coherence and inhibit practice for decades to come. Like its ambivalence about reform and revolution, the left’s contradictory approaches to gender and race would surface in the doctrinal politics articulated in proletarian novels.

For taxonomic purposes, U.S. proletarian novels can be divided into four types. The first type, the fictional autobiography, features a first-person working-class narrator-hero who, in the course of the tale, comes to a class-conscious understanding of the forces that have shaped his/her life. Thus Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930)—consisting of about 85% autobiography, according to its author—depicts the coming-of-age of a young Jewish-American on New York’s Lower East Side. In *Daughter of Earth* (1929; 1934) Agnes Smedley portrays the experiences of one “Marie Rogers” (a close approximation of Smedley) as she grasps the grounding of violence against women—from Western mining camps to New York prisons—in the material and ideological imperatives of capitalism. Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933) tells the story of one “Larry Donavan”—in many ways a stand-in for the author—who becomes a union militant as he abandons petty-bourgeois escapism and accepts his place in the muck and mire of proletarian life. In all these fictional autobiographies, the gaining of mature selfhood is portrayed as inseparable from the acquisition of class consciousness. And while the genre’s stress upon authenticity runs the risk of a certain economistic workerism, these texts’ representations of proletarian self-actualization provide compelling reading.

The second type, the proletarian bildungsroman (the novel of individual development), also focuses on a single protagonist, but in a patently fictional way: this is the most conventionally novelistic of the modes of the proletarian novel. Often depicting the transformation of false consciousness into class consciousness, this genre ordinarily deploys omniscient narration and an array of minor characters representing a range of political potentialities and stances. Thus Myra Page’s *Moscow Yankee* (1935) portrays an unemployed Detroit auto worker who goes to the Soviet Union during the First Five Year Plan and—largely through his growing love for an emancipated “new Soviet woman”—is won over to this world struggling to come into being. Grace Lumpkin’s *To Make My Bread* (1932), a novel climaxing in the dramatic Gastonia textile strike and loosely based on the life of Gastonia organizer and martyr Ella May Wiggins, depicts the emergence of proletarian consciousness in Bonnie McClure, a woman descending from the mountains to the factory: in microcosm, the novel represents the birth of a class. Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Girl* (composed in 1939, published, rev. ed., 1990) portrays an anonymous young Minnesotan whose preparations for motherhood are simultaneously preparations for class warfare. Guy Endore’s *Babouk*, a historical novel set in revolutionary Haiti, relates the dialectical transformation of African tribal collectivity into a steely resolve to murder the oppressor: Babouk’s internal contradictions mirror the course of historical necessity.

These and other proletarian bildungsromans vary in the degree to which they restrict the reader to the parameters of the protagonist’s awareness. Lumpkin’s novel rarely exposes the reader to any knowledge or voices to which Bonnie is not privy; anticapitalist, let alone revolutionary, politics are virtually absent from the text. Le Sueur’s text, with its nearly inarticulate protagonist, runs the risk of biologizing the assumption of class consciousness. Endore’s novel, by contrast, continually inserts anachronistic historical information and hectors the reader into seeing the present-day implications of Babouk’s story. Despite their differing narratorial voices, however, all
these texts attach the reader’s growth in political awareness primarily to the main character’s development. In the proletarian bildungsroman, then, the possessive individualism furnishing the premise of the bourgeois bildungsroman is converted to left-wing uses: identification with a class-conscious protagonist serves to challenge the legitimacy of the capitalist social order that would put more value on possessive individualism in the first place.

Whether or not writers of proletarian bildungsromans subverted or end up being subverted by the individualistic premises of their chosen genre varies on a case by case basis. Intuiting the potential pitfalls attending such a literary borrowing, however, many proletarian writers opted to abandon altogether the single-protagonist format. Some writers used the genre of what might be called the multiprotagonist social novel, a conventionally realistic text in which a large cast of characters embody multiple class and ideological positions. In Arna Bontemps’s Black Thunder (1936), a historical novel about the aborted slave revolt led by Gabriel Prosser, a range of characters, black and white, not only display varying degrees of courage and fear but also expose the reader to a philosophical debate about the Rights of Man beyond the range of Gabriel himself. Robert Cantwell’s The Land of Plenty (1935) uses the occasion of a strike in a lumber mill to explore the potentiality for self-rule in the group of workers who make the mill function. William Attaway’s Blood on the Forge (1941), which goes back to the Great Migration and, particularly, the use of African-American migrants to break the Great Steel Strike of 1919, treats the three Moss brothers as a miniature version of the emerging black proletariat. While still occasionally restricting the reader to the confines of the characters’ awareness—a quality cited by Ralph Ellison in his New Masses critique of Attaway’s lingering nationalism—the proletarian social novel bypasses many of the individualistic limitations of the bildungsroman and proves a useful vehicle for representing class struggles, past and present.

Perhaps the most successful—certainly, at least, the most inventive—mode of 1930s proletarian fiction is the collective novel. Similar to the social novel in its portrayal of a broad range of social types, the collective novel goes further by unabashedly taking a whole society as its protagonist: the foremost example of the 1930s collective novel is John Dos Passos’s kaleidoscopic trilogy, U.S.A. (1937). In creating this expanded sense of collectivity, sometimes the text breaks down the notion of “character” as such, creating a group-consciousness in which individual voices become indistinguishable. For example, in Clara Weatherwax’s novel about striking lumber workers, Marching! Marching! (1934), the workers’ meditations about how to respond to a fellow-worker’s on-the-job death are rendered as a kind of collective murmur.

At times the collective novel contains fictional characters who never meet: in Josephine Herbst’s Rope of Gold, for instance, the left-wing journalist Victoria Chance and the union organizer Steve Carson never cross paths. Clearly the reader must figure out for herself/himself why these characters inhabit the same volume: active engagement of the reader in the process of comprehending—and hence shaping—the total social structure is a vital component of many collective novels. Sometimes the text abruptly shifts registers, moving from the fictional lives of individuals to narrative proclamations about politics and history: the famous interchapters in John Steinbeck’s “Okie” migrant novel The Grapes of Wrath (1939), which eloquently announce the movement from “I” to “we,” culminate a strategy deployed by earlier experimenters with the collective novel. Still another technique used by collective novelists is the introduction of documentary materials—headlines, leaflets, songs—requiring the reader to separate the wheat from the chaff and to contemplate the construction of historical discourse itself as arena of class struggle. While adopting the form of the collective novel would in itself prove to be no guarantee of leftist political doctrine—Dos Passos and Steinbeck had mixed credentials as radicals when they composed their major works, and they would ultimately move far to the right—the genre opened up possibilities for welding revolutionary politics to novelistic form that remain unexplored to this day.

Although the Depression-era subject matter of many U. S. proletarian novels may seem somewhat remote to readers of today, when viewed dialectically these texts display contradictions—aesthetic and political—of continuing relevance. The aesthetic query that these texts pose, as suggested above, has to do with the relation of genre to political doctrine. To what extent do traditional novelistic forms, such as the bildungsroman, carry such bourgeois ideological and epistemological baggage that they vitiate the would-be revolutionary message they are intended to convey? Conversely, to what extent do experimental forms,
such as the collective novel, encourage the writer to imagine the new and different kinds of selfhood that emerge through the class struggle and presage post-revolutionary society? Scrutiny of the U.S. proletarian novel reveals that there is no quick answer to these questions. While Page’s Moscote Yankee is to a degree hampered by its focus on a single protagonist and its deployment of a conventional love-plot, it also exerts a counterpurpose on these inherited “bourgeois” fictional elements by depicting a new kind of individual—somewhat paradoxically, a collective individual—emerging from the experience of witnessing, and contributing to, socialist construction. Conversely, Dos Passos’s U. S. A. trilogy, although offering an exciting and multi-faceted representation of history through its highly experimental approach to totality, nonetheless signals, in its final volume, a doctrinal rejection of communism and a cynicism about the out- come of class struggle that significantly reduces its revolutionary impact.

The political query that these texts pose has to do, finally, with the relation of revolution to reform—an issue of continuing relevance to the left. Although the specific conjunctures that produced the leftist Third Period (1928-34) and the (arguably) class-collaborationist Popular Front (1935-39) no longer define the political landscape, anticapitalist political movements still confront the extent to which discourse about the yet-to-come classless society should or should not shape struggles taking place in the painful reality of the now. U. S. proletarian novels cannot provide any easy answers to this query. But what they do display is a portrait of masses of people in motion to bring into being what was then called “a better world”; and what they do dispel is the cynical notion—perhaps the principal form of bourgeois ideology needed to be combated in our time—that “human nature” is the barrier to revolutionary change. Those of us who continue to desire, and strive toward, that better world thus have much to learn from both the limitations and the strengths of the proletarian literature produced some fifty to sixty years ago.


Suggested Reading List (almost all these books are available in paperback)
Mike Gold, Jews Without Money
Agnes Smedley, Daughter of Earth
Jack Conroy, The Disinherited
Myra Page, Moscow Yankee
Grace Lumpkin, To Make My Bread
Josephine Herbst, Rope of Gold
Guy Endore, Babouk
Arna Bontemps, Black Thunder
Robert Cantwell, The Land of Plenty
William Attaway, Blood on the Forge
John Dos Passos, U. S. A.
Clara Weatherwax, Marching! Marching!
Meridel Le Sueur, The Girl
John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath