

Proletarian Literature in America

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IN American literary history, 1932 will be remembered as the year in which a small, but noisy, group of American writers discovered the name of Karl Marx. Some may think they discovered more than the name. But this is a mistake. With the possible exception of one (V. F. Calverton) no one of this group has shown in his writings that he has understood what Marxism stands for. Some of them probably have read Marx. Mr. Edmund Wilson expressly said that he had; some of them may be able to quote Marx, but none of them has as yet shown himself capable of applying the Marxian method either to literature, or to anything else.

Marxism is above everything else a method. To be able to repeat what Marx said is of no value. For those who do naught but quote from Marx and do not know how to use the Marxian method, Marxism is nothing but an old, though honored, dogma to be piously repeated. They have an easy job. Whenever a problem confronts them, all they have to do is to look up the "Holy Scriptures", and see what Marx said about it. The trouble with this kind of Marxism is that in Marx, as in every great and versatile thinker, one may find quotations for or against almost anything. In our time, when we are confronted with so many problems about which Marx never dreamed, most of the quotations must be construed and interpreted. Some "Marxists" are so skilful in construing and interpreting, that Marx himself would not be able to recognize his own creation. It is sufficient to recall to what extent quotations from Marx were used by the Mensheviks against the Bolsheviks and vice versa! The books of both warring factions fairly bristle with quotations. The trouble is that quotations neither prove nor disprove anything.

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Living Marxism is not a set of dogmas to be quoted like the scripture. It is a method to be applied from day to day. The important thing is not to find out what Marx said, or would have said, but to be able to look at the passing show of life from a Marxian point of view. What would be the first thing that a Marxian critic in America would have to do? He would have to take American literature, past and present, and analyze it with the view of finding out what the social and economic forces were that produced it; what the social and economic forces were that determined its evolution, one way or another; what class ideology and class aspirations it reflects. The Marxian critic would not come to the writer with demands. He would give no ultimatums. He knows well that such demands are vain. No artist has ever consciously chosen either his way, or his philosophy. The artist is under an unconscious psychological compulsion. His "way" grows on him. And of his philosophy, and especially of the social and economic implications latent in his philosophy, of their class character, he is usually unconscious. Most writers become indignant when told that they give expression in their art to the moods, longings, fears and aspirations of this or that economic class. Their indignation proves nothing. Art is a social product and so is the artist. Art does not merely reflect life; it reflects life from a certain angle. In our class-divided society it really means from the angle of some one social class. But the artist is right in his indignation when he is told that he consciously represents this or that class. Though there may be some exceptions, especially among proletarian artists, this is usually not the case. The deeper, the real motivation behind the artist's art are hidden somewhere deep down in his unconsciousness. It remains for the Marxian critic to dig them out and bring them to light.

This requires hard and responsible work. Our new-fangled Marxists have, instead, chosen the easier road. They content themselves by demanding: Give us proletarian art! Give us proletarian literature! And they believe that simply by demanding what they want, have they done their duty as Marxists! They seem to believe that the only thing necessary

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to divert the literature of a nation into new and different channels, is to convince the writers that they must begin to treat other subjects in a new way. If the writers will only listen to their demands, everything will be all right; if not, well then, they are social fascists!

What really happens when a writer decides to violate his own native talent and writes as demanded may be illustrated by two glaring instances. Michael Gold is undoubtedly a good and pious Communist. He certainly would wish to create proletarian literature. But his talent lies in a different direction. The only really worth while thing he has done is his "Jews Without Money", and there is not a trace of proletarianism in this book. It is through and through petit-bourgeois in ideology as well as in execution. But Mr. Gold has also written other things. He has written consciously proletarian stories. They may have great value as communist propaganda, but as stories they do not amount to anything. Mr. Edmund Wilson has very aptly called them Sunday school stories.

And here is Sherwood Anderson, who has, it seems, decided to leave Winesburg, Ohio, to see what he can do with proletarians, strikes, communists, etc. The result is "Beyond Desire", the most inferior thing that Anderson has ever done. Anderson knows Winesburg, Ohio. It is in his blood. But, he knows nothing either about the class-struggle or about the revolting proletarian. He has some kind of hazy, vague idea of what he thinks is communism, and this is enough for him not only to give his name to communist statements of which he knows nothing, but also to write a novel about communists. Having to make some kind of a compromise with his former self, he filled one half of his book with the usual erotic and neurotic personages, and one half with communists. If his neurotics of "Beyond Desire" are nothing but shadows, his communists are even less than that. Let us look at Anderson's communists.

At the very beginning we at once meet with an Andersonian communist. It concerns a girl, a school teacher. "She has become a sincere red. She thought there was something

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beyond desire, but that you had to satisfy desire and understand and appreciate the wonders of desire first."

The revolution will have to wait for that school teacher. How long the revolution will have to wait for this "sincere red" no one can tell. First of all she must "satisfy desire and understand and appreciate the wonders of desire." At the opening of the novel we find her "trying out" Neil Bradley. She told Neil that she had "tried out" two other men before she came to him. "All the way?" the Communist Babbit asks with awe. "Sure," she said, and if she finds Neil satisfactory, this sincere red will actually "marry him".

Neil is himself a red. He looks at his approaching marriage from a purely revolutionary point of view. "Why not?" he asked. He said people had to prepare themselves. The revolution was coming. When it came it was going to demand strong and quiet people willing to work, not just noisy ill prepared people. He thought every woman ought to begin by finding her man, at any cost, and that every man ought to make the search for the woman" (p. 9).

This then is what Anderson's "reds" are going to do for the revolution. They will first of all find their men and women, and then produce the "strong and quiet people" that are necessary for the revolution.

The book however is mainly the story of "Red", a respectable middle class student, who during vacation goes to work in a mill. "Red" would never have stumbled into a strikers' camp, and certainly never have thought of sacrificing himself for the workers' cause, had not Ethel driven him to despair. She had slept with him once as an experiment and wanted him no more. In "olden times" he would either have committed suicide or found another girl. But we are living in a revolutionary epoch, so out of despair "Red" wanders off to a strikers' camp. The strikers, their camp, their struggles are depicted by Anderson in a purely "Daily Worker" fashion. When Red goes there he does not know what to do.

"Lord, he thought, I am here, in this place now. How did I get here? Why did I let myself get here?"

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And at the most decisive moment, when Red, unknowingly, unconsciously and unwillingly gives his life for the workers he debates with himself thus:—

“He had wanted to come to the communist camp. No he hadn’t, yes he had. He sat quarreling with himself as he had been doing for days. If I could only be sure of myself, he thought.” (p. 255.)

And that is all! Anderson blundered into a field that is alien to his own, a world about which he has not the slightest idea. And the result is “Beyond Desire”, a book that Anderson himself will probably want to forget as soon as he can. To demand from Sherwood Anderson proletarian literature is neither wise nor just. Anderson could not give what is not in him; neither can Gold, nor any other writer. When the proletarian artist comes along, he will be proletarian even if he has never heard of the “Modern Quarterly”. The problem for the Marxian critic is not how to make the naturally non-proletarian writers become proletarians, but to interpret the American writer from a Marxian standpoint, to find what Plekhanov designated as the sociological equivalent in artistic creation. With the exception of V. F. Calverton’s book “The Liberation of American Literature”, which does not seem to be very popular among these “Marxists”, no attempt has been made to apply the Marxian method to the analysis of American literature. They have contented themselves with laying down demands. A poem or a story needs merely to flaunt the catch-phrases of the communist movement to be declared the artistic expression of the class-struggle. A host of talentless novelists and poets made good use of this “new fad” and had their worthless “creations” published in the “New Masses” and other such magazines. And people who otherwise know how to distinguish art from trash somehow believe that “art” like the “New Masses” poetry, for instance, is of any value. Here is a fair example of this “proletarian art”:

Ai Ai

Manchuria is a house of slaughter

Chiang Kai-Chek has betrayed China

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*The brave Nineteenth Route Army is become an old woman
Pu Yi dances to Tokyo's tune
Ai Ai*

(A. HAYES)

And here is another:

*Alabama, Alabama,
You have heard
The white workers' word;
Let the sound strike the ground
Of the South till it cowers:
These nine—who are black,
Give them back—they are ours!
White boss of Alabama,
Give them back without a hair
Burned upon the bloody chair,
Alabama!*

(ORRICK JOHNS)

The sentiments expressed in this poetry may be very fine, they may be even in complete correspondence with the Communist program, they may even be very proletarian, but they have nothing in common with art, and proletarian art must first of all be art, or it is useless in spite of its proletarianism.

The truth is that the so-called Marxian group discovered not Marxism but Communism, which they confuse with Marxism. The Marxian view of art is however an entirely different thing from the Communist view of art. What perversion the Communists have brought into Marxism is a very interesting subject in itself, and must be treated separately, but the official Communist view on art is not even a perversion of Marxism. It has nothing to do with it.

For the Marxist, art is a given social product, a part of social ideology which he wants to interpret from his point of view. When he has succeeded in finding "the sociological equivalent of the artistic creation", and he happens not to agree with it, or he thinks it even dangerous, he will certainly try to combat it. He will not combat the "artistic creation"

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but the "sociological equivalent". An artist giving expression to reactionary ideas, will nevertheless remain an artist. A proletarian disagreeing with the bourgeois ideas of a poet, will nevertheless enjoy his poetry, if poetry it is. Of course, the Marxist would like to see a great poet, or a great novelist, or a great painter come along, and give artistic expression to the moods, ideals, longings and aspirations of the working class. He believes that with the growth of the revolutionary movement, with the growth of the working class as a social power, such artists are bound to come. But, he also knows that the coming of this proletarian artist is not dependent upon editorials, or appeals, or the calling of names.

The Marxist is careful to distinguish between art dealing with proletarians or even with the proletarian movement, and proletarian art. To demand that the artist treat social themes, that he reflect social life and social struggles, has nothing to do either with Marxism or with proletarian art, though it may be of importance in itself. The Marxist may join in this demand, but he certainly has no monopoly on it.

The Communist view of art is entirely different. He demands that art should put itself at the service, not of the working class, but of the Communist party; not of the Communist ideal, but of the daily tasks of the Communist party. The artist is expected to "do his bit" in whatever daily campaign the party happens to be engaged. The critic is expected to do the same. The result is cheap, worthless propaganda of the "New Masses" kind instead of Marxian criticism.

Among the entire group of the new Marxists Mr. V. F. Calverton is both more prolific as well as more true to the Marxian method. His book "The Liberation of American Literature" is the only real contribution of this school to the understanding of American literature. Of course, the book has its faults. It is overstuffed with quotations. It is sprinkled all over with Communist "catch phrases" that really have nothing to do with the subject treated in the book (as if he could hope to soften William Z. Foster's heart by such meaningless repetitions of the "Daily Worker" "beauties"). Some of his historical facts seem to be incorrect. Nevertheless, it is

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the one book which approaches the history of American literature from a Marxist standpoint using, often very successfully, the Marxian method of analysis. Mr. Calverton also well understands and warns his readers that "proletarian writers are not to be confused with literary rebels," that a proletarian writer is not one who is either himself a proletarian or writes about proletarians, but one who is "imbued with a proletarian ideology instead of a bourgeois one. They are writers who have adopted the revolutionary point of view, and who try to express that ideology in their work."

In spite of his realistic and often sober view on this subject, even Mr. Calverton is not immune to the official Communist optimism on the subject of proletarian literature. In his article "Can we have a proletarian literature?" he says:

"American literature in the midst of its wanderings in the wilderness has been struck suddenly by a proletarian bombshell. It is still shivering from the shock."

Struck by a proletarian bombshell! That bombshell can not be anything else but the accomplishments of proletarian literature. Articles, or appeals, for proletarian literature, if they are not followed by literary accomplishments, can certainly not be the bombshell that could strike any literature. What then are the accomplishments of proletarian literature in America? In his "Liberation of American Literature" Mr. Calverton recounts the success of proletarian literature in the following words.

"In the main stream of the proletarian tradition today are to be found a fresh group of authors who have supplanted the earlier dominancy of Eastman and Dell."

Max Eastman and Floyd Dell are thus put among the "have beens". And who are those in the forefront of the "proletarian tradition" today?

"In the creative field this leadership has been seized by such novelists as John Dos Passos, Michael Gold, and Charles Yale Harrison."

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And this is the beginning and the end of the accomplishments of American proletarian literature; and this is the bombshell that struck American literature!

It is interesting to hear what Dos Passos has to say on this subject:

"Theodore Dreiser is, and has been for many years, a great American proletarian writer. He has the world picture, the limitations, and the soundness of the average American worker, and expresses them darn well. Sherwood Anderson does too. So did Jack London. We have had a proletarian literature for years, and are about the only country that has. It hasn't been a revolutionary literature, exactly, though it seems to me that Walt Whitman's a hell of a lot more revolutionary than any Russian poet I've ever heard of."

(The Modern Quarterly, Summer 1932, "Whither the American Writer",
a Questionnaire.)

Dos Passos is of course wrong, whereas Mr. Calverton is right when he declares both Dreiser and Anderson to be petit bourgeois writers—but then Dos Passos is the only real ace that Mr. Calverton could produce!

Will we have a proletarian literature in America? Undoubtedly, but as yet there is no trace of it.

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