Corrin Fosmire

English 393

Dr. Waligora-Davis

April 28, 2019

The Experience of African-Americans in 1930s Communist Literary Movements

The list of African-American literary figures with links to Communist literary initiatives is long and impressive. Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Claude McKay and Chester Himes, some of the biggest names in African-American literature, all had significant interaction with, if not membership in, the Communist Party-sponsored literary movements of the 1930s. These literary movements, notably the John Reed Clubs and publications such as *New Masses*, significantly lowered the barriers for poor African-Americans to publish works of fiction, poetry, and history. While there were stellar African-American writers earlier in American history, most of them had to work independently and in many cases denied their African-American heritage by passing as white (notably, Jean Toomer) in order to gain the opportunity to publish. These Communist groups gave the African-American literary community the chance to flourish all across the United States and to develop a collective voice and consciousness for the first time. Out of these efforts grew the naturalist protest novel, championed by Richard Wright, and a focus on the hybridization of African-American art forms such as jazz and blues with white American “high” art. Unfortunately, these efforts did not last. Undone by racist attitudes that were never fully eradicated and leftist infighting, these groups disintegrated, bringing to an end one of the most prolific eras of African-American literature.

What caused African-American intellectuals to flock to European-formulated and white-dominated Communist politics in the 1930s? Certainly, the Great Depression rocked confidence in the capitalist system across the whole of American society, but the central shift was one of perspective. The American Communist Party, a follower of the recently minted Marxist-Leninist strain of Communist ideology, focused on the African-American struggle in the United States as an oppressed “cultural nationality oppressed by imperialist capitalist states” (Washington 122). This was a shift away from a race-blind Marxist conception that held economic relations to be the base of human society, and all else a part of the superstructure. In order to bring African-Americans to the Party, Communists, now under the banner of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) after the merger of the American Communist Party and the Communist Party, engaged in many highly visible acts of protest against American racism. Of these acts, none was more important than the case of the Scottsboro Boys. In Alabama, nine young black men were arrested for raping two white girls, despite notable inconsistencies in the purported evidence. The Communist Party won the right to represent the Scottsboro Boys in court over the NAACP, which led to “the highpoint of the party’s notoriety in the black community” (Washington 124). These efforts brought many African-American intellectuals to the Party, but did not convince many working-class blacks, shaped by Booker T. Washington’s stance and the opposition of Marcus Garvey and the NAACP. Then, Washington concludes, “the literary school’s ideological perspective on black American life failed to reflect black American culture” (127). Still, those intellectuals that did join the Party were given tremendous opportunities to write their perspective of American society.

Once in the party, the Communist Party enabled African-Americans to produce literature in three main ways. They could publish literature read outside of the African-American community, they created specifically African-American literary institutions, and they brought increased international exposure and contact through Communist International movements. Leftist cultural institutions, such as the Communist Party USA-affiliated *Daily Worker,* the *Southern Worker*, *New Masses*, and *Partisan Review*, published African-American poetry rejected elsewhere for its radical content (Smethurst 33). They also reviewed books by African-Americans such as Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Alaian Locke. The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) even created a network of Workers Bookstores that distributed a wide variety of Marxist theory and “imaginative literature” (Smethurst 34). African-Americans also formed race-focused journals such as the *Negro Liberator*, notable for its reappropriation of spirituals and blues songs into narratives of class struggle, and *Negro Quarterly*, a journal edited by Ralph Ellison. There were also many specifically African-American newspapers exhibiting a large degree of Communist influence. *Harlem Quarterly*, *New Challenge*, and *Freedom* all included frequent columns, articles, and editorials by African-American Communists, (Smethurst 40-41). The CPUSA facilitated international connections as part of the larger international Communist movement. Eric Homberger states that the Soviet Proletcult, a movement to replace the monarchical aesthetics of literature with proletarian ideas, was “the dominant influence on the American literary left” (243). The Proletcult’s influence was not unique in the United States, as similar organizations created a worldwide network of proletarian writers called the International Union of Revolutionary Writers in 1928 (Homberger 235). This union helped African-Americans produce literature consumed worldwide in magazines such as the Hungarian *Magazine of Foreign Literature*, expanding the renown of their writings from regional at best to the majority of the world.

The particularly African-American perspective was evident in the literature produced by these literary movements in two main ways: the creation of the naturalistic protest school and the use of African-American vernacular and art forms in high art. The motto of the John Reed clubs was “Art is a class weapon” (Homberger 32), and the African-American writers used their art to draw attention to the realities of institutional racism in the United States. Following the dictum of the Soviet-influenced socialist realism school that “proletarians should write about what they know best” (Washington 137), African-American writers chose to represent the squalid realities they faced in the ghettos of Chicago, the plantations of the Deep South, and elsewhere in the United States. No longer depicting the ghettos as “hedonistic playgrounds,” there was an oppositional shift towards a realistic portrayal of the effects of racist housing policies to create rat-infested, structurally unsound houses hardly fit for occupation (Washington 174). Richard Wright, in his novel *Native Son*, possibly the most well-regarded novel to come out of this literary movement, does exactly that in the first few pages. Bigger Thomas kills a rat in their one-room apartment within the first five pages, and it is later revealed that this is the product of real estate companies’ wholesale refusal to sell housing to African-Americans outside of the South side of Chicago (*Native Son* 393). This project exemplified the desire of proletarian writers of all races to “expose interracial conflict as structural, showing its material relationship to capitalist accumulation” (Vials 163-164). Instead of merely “celebrating” and “affirming” diversity (Vials 163), these writers consciously critiqued race relations in the context of the capitalist mode of production. Another venue for African-Americans to differentiate themselves was in the focus on the “black folk subject” (Smethurst 24). In contrast to the work of high modernists inside the John Reed Clubs and beyond, African-American writers, notably including Langston Hughes, used “vernacular language, forms, and subjects” in their poems and novels, viewing these as “the most appropriate forms for the national expression of black people” (Smethurst 27-28). In this way, African-Americans carved out a unique and radically different aesthetic in the 1930s literary landscape, refusing to “elevate” their literary forms to the so-called “high” art of the time period.

Despite the accomplishments of these writers, the John Reed Clubs and *New Masses* were still not entirely accepting of African-Americans. There was a tendency towards African-American primitivism in the party, clearly evident in the misguided Black Belt Thesis. The CPUSA’s Black Belt Thesis articulated a plan for African-Americans that romanticized the rural peasantry of African-Americans in the South, which advocated the creation of a separate political state in the rural South. It bore, by many accounts, very little relationship to material conditions experienced in the country as a whole. Even though this romanticization was seen in writers such as Jean Toomer, and Sterling Brown at the time specifically gives the rural South the banner of the “authentic” black culture (Smethurst 26), the focus on the struggles of African-American farmers in the South was incredibly wrong-headed, as by consequence of the Great Migration there already were strong African-American cultures in Northern urban centers, which were completely ignored by this policy. In addition, fellow white proletarian writers made racially insensitive remarks towards many African-American writers, while members of the Communist Party were permitted to hold somewhat questionable attitudes towards race. Kenneth Fearing, a white proletarian writer in the 1930s, derided Langston Hughes’ use of African-American vernacular by writing that “with the American language, to which Hughes will have to turn, he is not familiar” (quoted in Smethurst 18). Notably, Fearing rejects the notion that “Negro dialect and jazz rhythms” can be considered “American language,” revealing a condescending attitude towards black literary expression in a prominent member of the John Reed Clubs. Even Nelson Algren, at one time a close personal friend of Richard Wright, accused Wright of exiling himself from his own country out of fear, exhibiting a lack of empathy towards Wright’s desire to temporarily escape the prevalent racism of American society (Taylor 141). It was in fact attitudes such as this that chased Wright out of the Communist Party, by his own admission. Wright is “disgusted” by his degradation in New York as he is unable to find a place to stay due to oversights of the white Communists of Harlem (“I Tried” 137). At a crucial moment at a May Day parade, Wright is invited to march by a black Communist, only to be literally thrown out by white Communists suspicious of his ideological position, while the black Communists do not even attempt to defend him (“I Tried” 161). This points to the continuation of unchallenged racism in the CPUSA, furthered by James Smethurst’s assertion that the CPUSA “somewhat relaxed standards as to the expression of what might be called racist sentiments” (22). The CPUSA dug itself depeer into a hole by devaluing racial struggles in the interests of a notion of “national unity” (Smethurst 45), and by supporting the Korematsu decision, widely regarded today as an egregious abuse of human rights, to legalize the internment of Americans with Japanese heritage, even those who were members of the Communist Party. These decisions constituted a perceived betrayal of the African-American community and many other racial groups as well, and led to many African-American Communists, such as Wright himself and Claude McKay, to abandon and publicly critique the CPUSA.

One further nail in the coffin of these literary clubs was the prevalence of leftist infighting. Richard Wright testified to the ideological rigidity of many within the Communist Party in his essay “I Tried to be a Communist.” After mocking his contributions to the movement and calling him out-of-touch, the Communist rank-and-file assail his lack of ideological purity. Wright is seen associating with a man accused of holding “class collaborationist attitudes” and “anti-leadership tendencies” (“I Tried” 133). This stain on his reputation is never fully overcome, as he is then branded a “defeatist” (“I Tried” 135), a “bastard intellectual”, and crucially, an “incipient Trotskyite” (“I Tried” 141). Here, members of the CPUSA demonstrate their tendency towards leftist infighting. Instead of uniting Communists of all stripes to fight racism and capitalism, the rank-and-file of the CPUSA seem more interesting in rooting out those who don’t hold the particularly strain of Marxism currently in vogue, as they ape the protean Soviet position for decades on end. Wright also tells of a harrowing attempt at his *Left Front* publication to “rid the club of traitors” (Wright 124). Many were accused due to the ravings of a paranoid mental patient, and were very nearly ousted from the group with no hard and fast evidence. This tendency to emulate the Moscow show trials and crushing ideological rigidity blunted Wright’s enthusiasm for a cause he sincerely believed in, and eventually lead to his crisis of faith in the Party. Smethurst also mentions the figure of the “cultural commissar” (34). This figure, in the imagination if not reality of many, refused to allow certain works to be published for the ideological problematic content. This obviously had a deleterious effect on the freedom of African-Americans to produce literature and art freely, as they now had to funnel their work through a white censor who could object to their work for not properly portraying class struggle, among other things. White writers were also rejected from the Party by a sequence of events eerily similar to Wright’s. Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, initially, like Wright, “quite sympathetic initially to the Bolshevisk and the CPUSA”, were labeled “Trotskyists” (Smethurst 19) and forced out of the Party, significantly reducing their willingness and potential to pursue their ideological project any further.

This intense sectarianism led to the dissolution of many of the most important organs of the proletarian literary movement. A particularly damning report came out of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, which accused *New Masses* of having no plan to fight the “class enemy in literature” and of “general theoretical backwardness” (Homberger 241). This was an almost entirely ideological critique, noting an “inadequate mastery of the militant Marxist-Leninist outlook” (Homberger 241) which reveals that one key point of contention was the insufficient blind adherence to the Soviet ideological position. The John Reed Clubs responded to these allegations by attempting to reorganize the *New Masses* into a highly ideological organization. Notably, the second point of the ensuing plan was the following: “Fight against fascism, whether open, or concealed, like social-fascism” (Homberger 242). Social-fascism was a Stalinist doctrine that labeled insufficiently radical socialists “social fascists,” declaring in effect that those who did not openly support the Communist party in all of its efforts were instead helping the fascists. This absurd demand for ideological purity led very quickly to the death of the John Reed Clubs, notably, as Wright and Homberger point out, without consulting the actual membership of these clubs. After the death of these organizations, the decline of African-American participation through Communist venues ensued, ending a golden age of African-American proletarian literature and turning towards a dogmatic ideological purity reminiscent of *1984.*

Despite the untimely end of these literary movements, African-Americans significantly contributed to Marxist thought and strove to end the harshly exploitative system of racism-tinged capitalism in the United States. While many Marxists, including Eugene Debs, viewed the plight of the African-American in the United States as just one of many manifestations of a capitalist system that was affecting all, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and many others besides, articulated a new racially-conscious version of Marxism that significantly contributed to Marxist discourse in the United States. Even more importantly, these writers presented a vision of universal brotherhood of oppressed peoples, a dream to break the cycle wherein the “immigrant of today” is turned into “the oppressor of tomorrow” (Vials 178), and produced a distinctly African-American literary tradition that subverted primitivist and exotic conceptions of African-Americans as violent, stupid, and incapable of artistic expression. As Antonio Gramsci, in his theoretical concept of cultural hegemony, demonstrates, the practice of art itself is shaped by those who have the means and the time to do so. The storming onto the scene of poor African-American writers in itself constituted a powerful attack on this cultural hegemony. While literature and art is often regarded as being outside of the domain of politics and power, works of art such as *the Death of Marat* have had a massive impact on the current state of the world. The question of who controls the culturally dominant narrative is one of fundamental importance to all societies, and analysis of this is still necessary in the present day to fully understand how ideology affects how people think and interact with their surroundings.

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