

The Continuing Relevance of Proletarian Literature in a Time of “Endless War”

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1. An erroneous idea having currency among many self—styled progressive academics in the United States—postmodernists, neo—Marxists, and post—Marxists alike—is the notion that people in the U.S. inhabit a “post—industrial” society to which the categories of Marxist class analysis no longer have applicability. Exploitation may occur beyond the shores of the U.S., these commentators concede, but in the U.S. almost all work is “mental” or “service” work producing no surplus value. “Class” is thus seen to designate “status” or “income level,” but not social relations of production, much less the antagonisms to which these give rise. Often theorized as part—the least important part—of a trilogy also constituted by gender and race, class is viewed as merely one among several “subject positions.” It is held to possess neither a privileged explanatory power nor a privileged basis for emancipation. Indeed, Marxism’s claim to offer a meta—theory of history and social organization, construed as “class reductionism,” is frequently seen as a threat to human liberation.

2. A further consequence of this vitiated notion of class is that people living in the U.S. are held to benefit from the existence of exploitation elsewhere in the world. To the extent that exploitation is acknowledged, this insight produces a kind of hazy nationalist guilt: “we” are all responsible for “their” hard lives. Infecting not only academics and social theorists but also many rank—and—file participants in the anti—globalization movement, this class—denying politics of guilt substitutes super—exploitation for exploitation, effaces awareness of the unequal exchange of labor power for wages in the heartland of world imperialism—the U.S. itself—and crucially disempowers the international movement to transform society in an egalitarian manner.

3. The prevalence in the U.S. of this non—class conscious notion of “we” currently disempowers the movement against the war in Iraq, exciting and inspiring as this movement may be in its numbers and its energy. Not only do antiwar activists often repeat the ruling—class mantras that “we” are bombing Baghdad, seeking “regime change,” etc. In addition, the politics of guilt proposes that “we” in the U.S. are responsible for our rulers’ hunger to control the world’s oil supply, even though it is oil companies and automobile manufacturers that have prevented the development of alternate energy sources and masterminded the suburban sprawl making the average U.S. working—class family utterly dependent upon a car—sometimes two—for survival. The slogan “No Blood for Oil” potentially designates imperialism as the cause of the current war, but it often blurs into the proposition that “we” in the U.S. are responsible for the war because we cannot detach ourselves from our automobile—based “lifestyle.” The slogan “Not In Our Name” has the merit of challenging the militaristic “we” and declaring the speakers’ disconnection with government policy, but it articulates rejection of the war as a denial of complicity grounded in abstract ethics rather than class consciousness.

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4. The above considerations frame my conviction that reading and studying proletarian literature remains a vital, indeed crucial, project for radical academics in the humanities. By “proletarian literature,” I mean the body of literature produced primarily during the Depression decade under the influence of a mass Communist—led movement. Comprising a broad range of poetic styles and narrative structures, proletarian literature featured exploitation as the causal matrix of oppression, both objective and subjective, and class struggle as the means to a “better world.” Moreover, it envisioned literary works unabashedly as “weapons“ in that struggle. (In the U.S., some of most prominent proletarian writers were Jack Conroy, Richard Wright, Grace Lumpkin, William Attaway, Tillie Olsen, Agnes Smedley, John Dos Passos, Mike Gold, and Meridel Le Sueur, though I could mention many more.) I have spent many years studying proletarian literature—especially that produced by radical African—American writers—as well as teaching this literature to working—class students at the multi—ethnic public university in New Jersey where I work. I have found that the class—denying postmodernist wisdom about “post—industrial society” runs counter to the experience of these students, most of them low—waged workers who have difficulty keeping up with their studies and paying their bills. While understandably anxious about their survival and advancement in the harsh and unstable U.S. economy, and often caught up in immigrant illusions about the American Dream, these students nonetheless respond openly, even passionately, to proletarian literature’s images and narratives of workers overcoming false consciousness and uniting to struggle against their common oppression. The insights proletarian texts supply into the grounding in class society of sexism and racism—as both ideologies and material practices—serve to illuminate the politics of personal life and to alleviate the misdirected anger at times produced by liberal feminism and multiculturalism, which tend to blame men for sexism and “whites” for racism without showing the ways in which it is above all capital that reinforces and benefits from these modes of oppression. And even though there is no significant movement for socialism or communism in the U.S. at present, and the failure of twentieth—century movements for egalitarianism has left a legacy of cynicism and demoralization, proletarian literature nonetheless convinces some of my students that a “better world“ remains both possible and necessary.

5. The value of the proletarian literature produced some seventy years ago is not simply that it continues to resonate with the *experiences* of working—class people. because most works of proletarian literature were written from a consciously Marxist standpoint, they implicitly—and at times explicitly—provide a *theoretical* understanding of social reality that enables their present—day readers to grapple with the current conjuncture. Three commonly found features of proletarian literature strike me as particularly important. The first of these is the critique of ideology. Postmodernist theory would have us believe that there are no ideologies but only competing discourses—that the mediation of all thought through language precludes the possibility for adjudicating that one standpoint is more “true,” more adequate to reality, than another. Through its many portraits of workers afflicted by false consciousness, but often achieving greater objectivity through class struggle and left—wing political education, proletarian literature lays out the imperative necessity for querying the forms of consciousness—notions of loyalty, of human potentiality, of common sense—that bind us, emotionally and conceptually, to the regime of capital. At a time when people in the U.S. are being asked to channel their expressions of human sympathy into the flags and yellow ribbons that facilitate their acceptance of

the deaths of both Iraqis and American G.I.s, the importance of this lesson cannot be exaggerated.

6. The second feature of proletarian literature that arms its readers theoretically is its aspiration to portray reality in its totality. Even when proletarian texts recapitulate the necessarily myopic stances of individuals blinkered to one degree or another by ideology, they frequently find the means to bring to the reader, if not always to the characters, an understanding of social causality grounded in anticapitalist critique. Indeed, one of the most rewarding features of analyzing works of proletarian literature is uncovering the devices—simultaneously literary and political—by which they render the interconnectedness of wealth and poverty, of personal and systemic violence. Sometimes the reader's education is effected in fairly straightforward ways, by narrators and mentor characters. But often proletarian texts undertake quite ingenious experiments with form, structure and style in order to show their readers how proximate causes lead back to ultimate causes that in turn reveal the fundamental contradictions of class society. At a time when the ideological state apparatuses are working overtime, as it were, to disarticulate the realms of the economic, the political, and the cultural in order to persuade us of the necessity for “endless war” on “terrorism,” proletarian literature's insistence upon a Marxist understanding of totality arms us to grapple with imperialist logic shaping the barbarism of the current conjuncture.

7. Finally, proletarian literature's focus on class as a social relation of production, and hence on the unremittingly antagonistic relation between exploiters and exploited, does much to counter the mystifying proposition of common interest that underlies the rhetorics of nationalism and patriotism. Even when proletarian texts do not directly raise the notion of proletarian internationalism, it is the logical conclusion to their portrayal of class. At a time when “support our troops” needs to mean, at the very least, “bring the troops home,” and, beyond this, “turn the guns around,” we should treasure any reminders that the interests of capitalists and proletarians are always and everywhere fundamentally opposed. Proletarian literature proposes that, for the mass of people in all countries, the only “we” of any value is that which identifies us as the workers of the world. This literature is therefore our collective treasure.