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ALAN M. WALD

Marxist Literary Debates in the 1930s

Parts of the Truth

The traumatic onset of the 1930s retains its darkly mythic pull over any attempt to represent this complex and variegated period. The very notion of a "Thirties Culture" should invite skepticism, especially if the enterprise entails a retroactive search for a governing logic. Even the idea of a distinctive chronology can be deceptive inasmuch as the decisive events that made up the beginning of 1930s culture are still open to debate, and the continuing attentiveness to so many aspects of the decade up to the present show that there are ways in which it has never really ended. By economic class, region, gender, and color, the experience of the era was different for different kinds of cultural workers and audiences. Although there are various 1930s, the attraction to radicalism of so many of the best-known and respected writers of the time continues to compel the attention of abundant students, scholars, and political activists.

This engagement with radicalism was foreshadowed by the 1927 Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee, formed on behalf of the two anarchist Italian immigrants accused of murder. Writers such as John Dos Passos (1896–1970) and Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) took to the streets, and a remarkable amount of fiction, poetry, drama, and art was produced to commemorate their failed effort to obtain clemency. A more coherent kind of movement, with Marxism at center stage, was emphatically under way by the 1932 appearance of the "Culture and the Crisis" manifesto of the League of Professionals for Foster and Ford. This was issued under the names of Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941), Langston Hughes (1902–1967), Edmund Wilson (1895–1972), and fifty other intellectuals who proudly supported the Communist Party presidential election campaign. Ever since, decade after decade, young people have felt a sense of solidarity with the motivating point of this effort. That is, 1930s literary radicalism represents a still-unfinished exertion on the part of a new generation committed to creatively thinking its

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way through a recalcitrant universe of war, revolution, fascist aggression, colonial domination, brutal economic inequality, and violent racism.

Undeniably, there was a specificity to the context in which this occurred, which any attempt to discuss the 1930s needs to address. Against a background of probing and often documentary-like fiction, poetry, and drama customarily associated with the decade, one finds essays and declarations in which Marxists, radicals, and liberals of various types duke it out over the efficacies of the Communist policies of "social fascism," "proletarian literature," and the Popular Front, as well as the events in Spain, the Moscow Trials, and the fear of international war. For those who continue to work in the Marxist tradition, there are two overriding issues: (1) how to assess the experience of "Stalinism," the accepted term for Soviet rule after the 1920s and the kind of communism embraced by the official Communist parties; and (2) how to parse and develop the elements available in the 1930s for forging an independent revolutionary socialism reaching to our own times. (Note: Pro-Soviet Communism will be designated with a capital "C" and the broader ideology with a small "c.") These and related topics comprise the circumambient intellectual culture in which artistic discourse was situated, affecting even those at a distance from or opposed to the militant elements. A portion of scholarship on the 1930s episodically revisits this legacy in ways that can be rich, thought-provoking, and subtle.

In spite of many admirable studies of the topic, how to calibrate the actual weight and significance of any ideological presence, such as Marxism, remains in dispute. Dissimilar assessments are no doubt related to the difficulty of neutrally assembling data to determine impact and also to the kinds of definitions held by the research scholar. One must also consider the manner in which to think about examining and evaluating cultural importance itself. Does the scholar focus on epic successes in sales and reputation, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *Native Son* (1940)? Or on works later esteemed to be of high quality but with minimal readership at the time, such as *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* (1933) and *Call It Sleep* (1934)? Incomplete projects that may reveal elements of thought not fully appreciated then or even now, such as Tillie Olsen's fragment "The Iron Throat" (*Partisan Review*, 1934) and the aborted collaborative journal *Marxist Quarterly* (1937)? What about the vast amounts of correspondence, private diaries, and unpublished manuscripts by the famous and forgotten? To organize a clear and comprehensive narrative from so many competing voices and experiences may be less suitable to the task than assembling a story of stories . . . or a puzzle of puzzles.

A judicious enquiry into the published record concerning the literature and art of the decade suggests some emerging patterns in the sequence of

re-appropriations of the differing tempos and contested meanings generated by the long-ago events of the Great Depression. The upshot of such a review is not that it unmasks disastrous efforts to impose a single strong narrative; instead, one discovers step-by-step alterations in the manner in which the politico-cultural ethos and import are represented as singular components and also part of the big picture. In fact, by the new millennium we can discern a persistent trajectory of an expanding bandwidth accompanied by an eclipse of some one-time core concerns. In effect, there is a literary version of "uneven and combined development," the sociopolitical theory that progress does not necessarily come through a sequence of unilinear stages. Scholarship in one discipline never exists in isolation from neighboring disciplines and from changes in the larger intellectual climate; there are spillover effects that produce ruptures, regressions, and incomplete results. To reclaim the unity and diversity of the cultural upsurge of the 1930s for the twenty-first century will require a powerful interpretative synthesis to avoid diffusion and disarticulation of its constituents, including the place of Marxist literary debates. But how is this to be accomplished? Have we been progressing to a deeper and more insightful understanding of the Great Depression, or to multiple versions of a past that never was?

Paths Taken

What is *not* new in the paths we find taken by researchers and chroniclers is the marked interdisciplinary approach, the incorporation of a range of cultural practices. From the very first, the study of the 1930s was associated with the growth of the discipline of American Studies, itself a product of the Great Depression. This meant an engagement with fiction, poetry, drama, art, film, photography, radio, music, journalism, and architecture, along with a consciousness about social class, and racial and ethnic factors. This ensemble comprised the foundation for the elements most attractively pronounced in the evolution of scholarship about the culture of the 1930s.

On the one hand, the record shows a welcome increase in technical sophistication with which scholars address literary practice and varied cultural artifacts. This has culminated in inventive books over the last quarter of a century, such as Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Memory, 1910–45* (1989); James Bloom, *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (1992); Carla Carpetti, *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography and the Novel* (1993); Barbary Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–41* (1993); Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Left to Right: Wallace Stevens, The Thirties, and Literary Radicalism*

(1994); Walter Kaladjian, *American Culture between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (1994); Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (1994); Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathaniel West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (1995); Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–50* (1995); Paul Sporn, *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers' Projects in the Midwest* (1995); Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Intervention of the Welfare State* (2000); Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry between the World Wars* (2001); William Solomon, *Literature, Amusement and Technology in the Great Depression* (2002); Andrew C. Yerkes, *"Twentieth-Century Americanism": Identity and Ideology in Depression-Era Leftist Fiction* (2005); Jani Scandura, *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression* (2008); Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935–1947* (2009); Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (2010); and Ichiro Takayoshi, *American Writers and the Approach of World War II: A Literary History* (2015).

Concurrently, there has been a steady stream of well-researched volumes treating a diversifications of populations – mainly by color and gender – increasingly acknowledged to have produced "worthy" art: Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African American Cultural Politics, 1935–46* (1990); Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991); Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Mid-Western Literary Radicalism, 1898–1990* (1994); Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995); Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work and Fiction in the American 1930s* (1997); William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (1999); James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930–46* (1999); Rachel Rubin, *Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature* (2000); Michael C. Steiner, ed., *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West* (2013); Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (2014); Steven S. Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (2015); T. V. Reed, *Robert Cantwell and the Literary Left: A Northwest Writer Reworks American Fiction* (2015); and Benjamin Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism: Race and Transnational Radical Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (2016).

As one might anticipate, following the perspective of uneven and combined development, this often splendid expansion and enrichment has not been without some costs. For many different reasons, and in varying degrees, a number of these books present the political commitments of radical cultural workers as vague and simplified. Political identifications, when given, can be gutted of substance rather than be made more precise in light of new research and thinking. "Left" or "Progressive" has in some places replaced "Communism." Individuals who did not explicitly declare themselves Party members are from time to time described as non-Communist, even when there is abundant evidence that they shared the outlook of the broad Communist-led movement. In one worst-case scenario, the terms "anti-Stalinist," "anticommunist," and even "anti-Marxist" are presented unabashedly as "interchangeable."[1] This move obscures the historical fact that pro-Soviet politics can be opposed from widely different points on the political spectrum, from Leninist to liberal to fascist; even worse, it reinforces the conservative view that Stalinism is the essence of Marxism and communism. Finally, there seems to be a diminished attention to some of the critical intellectual and political history components – especially the actuality of the Russian Revolution. Progress in theory and research is being made, but on some topics it appears to go sideways more than forward.

In other words, various elements have combined to produce some stage-skipping and lateral movement that has been inconsistently productive. New research and a longer perspective on the politics of 1930s writers should have produced more well-rounded portraits of the web of desires, identifications, and practices of radical cultural workers; these are essential to cultural analysis to the extent that all works of art are crafted transmutations of personal experience and imaginings. Yet the drift is occasionally toward bypassing or playing down a creative rethinking of 1930s Marxist literary affiliations and contested ideas.

Some of these controversies of the Great Depression have actually increased in relevance. One of these is the recurrent weaponization of "authenticity" that began in the 1930s with declarations of writers and art that they were "proletarian" as a bid for literary value; starting in the late twentieth century, comparable claims of authenticity became mobilized on behalf of one's gender and ethnicity. Just recently, the 2016 campaign of Bernie Sanders for the presidential candidacy of the Democratic Party launched a discussion of the historical meaning of socialism and how it can be distinguished from the New Deal and Communism. To see the links between present and past requires a well-versed and fair-minded recapitulation of what was actually said in the debates of the literary Left. Many aspects, of course, involve the hot-button issue of Stalinism, which a number

of critics viewed as a regression from the promise of the Bolshevik Revolution and others assessed to be the logical result of Leninism and even Marxism. Although particulars may still be in dispute, much of what was suspected by various Soviet detractors in the 1930s Marxist literary debates has since been confirmed, which presents inconvenient truths for anyone who likes their radical narratives untainted by major paradoxes. Even those of us who correctly hold dear the Communist achievements in industrial unionism, the struggle for civil rights, and the instilling of an antifascist consciousness in the general population, must seek stark truth before comfort when it comes to the discrepancy between the widespread pro-Soviet beliefs (hardly limited to Party members) and the bloody reality. When writers become part of a movement that adulates a dictatorial thug and a system that murders its own cultural luminaries, some kind of unequivocal accounting is needed beyond familiar exculpating talking points – that the writers' intentions were good, that the United States had its own record of violence, and that reliable knowledge was difficult to obtain.

What is not needed is a "Communist Confidential," inasmuch as anticommunists, mostly in political science, history, and popular journalism, have already inundated the field with endless tales of espionage, slavish devotion to a Party leadership, and even moral turpitude. Nevertheless, there is no way to bottle up what has already been unbottled, which is the ruthless record of the Soviet Union to which the Communist movement required allegiance. A few scholars may operate in an echo-chamber of like-minded colleagues where the erosion of credibility is not an issue, but anyone committed to abetting the active continuity of literary radicalism as a self-critical tradition has a responsibility to clarify what happened to earlier generations as a prerequisite to doing better in the future. One must therefore work in a territory equidistant from those who view pro-Communist cultural workers through the oversimplifying anticommunist gaze, and those who just fudge the question by offering a drive-by blur of political associations that leaves vital matters indistinct.

What is at stake here at the end of the day is the pursuit of a materialist approach to "commitment." I do not mean "commitment" as a formal statement of allegiance, which might lead simply to the excerpting of the texts of not-always-scintillating manifestos. What matters for cultural commitment is stressed by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*: a "conscious, active, and open ... choice of position," which requires that scholars explore "its hard and total specificities."[2] In this instance, one is looking at choices made under the pressure of a precise social, political, and historical situation that shaped the landscape of the 1930s. One finds changes in "alignment" (Williams's term for the normal expression of a

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point of view merely through selected experience) that involve different considerations of the role of artist and critic; the relation of innovative aesthetic forms to tradition; the forging of a new culture; the reconciliation of dogmatic versions of Marxism with US political and cultural realities; the personal costs of joining a movement (to family, career, self); the challenge of a revolution betrayed; and the temptations and fear of apostasy. Where possible, this means an investigation into the palimpsests of the mind that produced the art, the mental resources of the literary imagination. What we should have in the end is a view of committed radicals as a network of fully-realized personalities. Yes, there was a shared horizon, but writers could be substantially at odds with each other even as they worked within it.

Some of the relevant debates and exchanges can be found within the framework of the communist movement itself. Oft-cited ones include the lively "Authors' Field Day: A Symposium on Marxist Criticism" in the July 3, 1934, *New Masses*; the rich and diverse "American Writers Congress Discussion Issue" that comprises the April–May 1935 *Partisan Review*; and the rebuttal to Horace Gregory (1898–1982) by Meridel Le Sueur (1900–1996), "The Fetish of Being Outside," in the February 26, 1935, *New Masses*. Many more can be found in literature responding to splits and breaks, for it was often the case that the shattering of relationships with the Party had the effect of producing even more interesting Marxisms and radicalisms. One can readily turn to the writings of Sidney Hook (1902–1989) on dialectics, social fascism, and the Popular Front, often in *Modern Monthly*; the debate between W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and James S. Allen (born Solomon Auerbach, 1906–1986) over *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935); the response by various factions on the Left to *A Note on Literary Criticism* (1936) by James T. Farrell (1904–1979); the post-1937 *Partisan Review*; and the exchange between John Dewey (1859–1952) and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) on "Ends and Means" in the June and August 1938 *New International*.

Nostalgia on Overdrive?

The current status of Marxist literary debates in light of uneven and combined development in the field may be explored by means of the recent publication of three high-quality books. All are exclusively devoted to an overview of Great Depression culture, although none could possibly live up to the sizable promise of their titles: David Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (2008); Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (2009); and Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (2009). Collectively they include some of the Marxist literary

debates, but in such a manner that both commitment and contemporary relevance recede to the margins as a strange and spectral presence. In Eldridge, the entire topic of Marxist radicalism is partitioned; mainly just a few pages in an introduction about "The Intellectual Context" and a half-dozen more in a subchapter called "Literature as Weapon." In Conn, there is a closing chapter about "the party line," although *Black Reconstruction* receives a few pages in a chapter on "Black Memory." In the work of Dickstein, who has always understood that the continuity between culture and politics is too thick to be compartmentalized, radicals and their commitment are omnipresent, albeit undeveloped, and in the end overwhelmed by nostalgia on overdrive.

The outcome is a downgrading of 1930s radical culture and its concomitant controversies to museum pieces. This is particularly vexing inasmuch as we live again in times when mainstream liberalism in the United States is facing predicaments to which it has no compelling response, when it has no solutions to the real pain experienced by large sectors of the population, and when a foreign policy leading to endless quagmires. Whatever their failings and disagreements, Marxist literary intellectuals of the 1930s tried hard to identify the actual causes of suffering and exploitation, and to formulate appropriate responses dramatically different from those producing the status quo. Although teleology is impermissible in historical scholarship, continuity is not. The problem of "the committed writer" that troubled the 1930s did not exist as an island in time. It once was quite clear that the Depression era stood out as an ideational crucible for the experiment of "engaged" literature in the United States, and a testing ground for the responsibilities of the intellectual and artist in the face of social crisis. The relationship between the writer and commitment is an emblematic paradox of modernity; no comprehensive overview can exist without creatively probing the tensions enacted. Is the interpretative frame about to be flipped? Not necessarily. If we place the current treatment of Marxist literary debates in a longer view, the present situation is explainable and – hopefully – rectifiable.

Starting after World War II, the study of the era was typically painted with a gloomy palette. The titles of the volumes launched to define the field seventy years ago mostly dramatized in shorthand the fear, angst, and efforts at rebellion generated by economic calamity and international uncertainty: *The Angry Decade: American Literature and Thought from 1929 to Pearl Harbor* (1947), by Leo Gurko; *The Anxious Years: America in the 1930s* (1963), edited by Louis Filler; *When Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theater in New York, 1929–41* (1963), by Morgan Himmselstein; *Years of Protest: A Collection of American Writings of the 1930s* (1967), edited by Jack Salzman and Barry Wallenstein; *The Strenuous Decade: A Social and Intellectual*

Record of the 1930s (1970), edited by Daniel Aaron and Robert Bendiner; *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology* (1973), edited by Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson; and *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s* (1982), edited by Fred R. Hobson and Ralph Bogardus. The cultural narrative that emerges from this catalog is rather rough and tumble.

What was being handed down to new readers in these earlier representations was neither stable nor finished. The first volumes to encapsulate the 1930s understood that its intellectual and cultural legacy was clearly a past, but had elements feeding into an ongoing quest by those not entirely comfortable with postwar society. To the extent that the tradition of the 1930s survived as something that might be usable, it was expected to undergo new fissures, thereby requiring much-needed research and theorization in years to come. For fledgling readers to come upon these accounts of Great Depression writing was a stimulus to immerse oneself in the many questions raised: Was the rise of this type of cultural radicalism an aberration or prefigurement, something of a prehistory of our intellectual present? To what extent did the 1930s tremors of change and volcanic eruptions produce a distinct break from previous influences and traditions? Could Marxism be "Americanized"? What does it mean, emotionally and in activism, to be a "committed" writer? How does one fashion revolutionary sensibilities in literary form? To what extent was the fascination with the Russian Revolution and Soviet Union a spur to hope or the route to disillusionment?

Fast-forward a few decades to the economic meltdown of 2008. The most popular of the three new syntheses from 2008 to 2009 is surely Dickstein's six-hundred-page doorstop narrative, showcasing his ability to weave many knotted-together tales into a colorful tapestry. The distinguished literary scholar aimed to make connections between the cultural events of the Depression and the recent crises that shook the new millennium. Nevertheless, the longingly pensive title he selected, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (2009), suggests a move away from the old approach of a melodrama of disaster and unresolved angry revolt. In seventeen chapters, grouped in four parts that go from "Discovering Poverty" to "The Search Towards Community," Dickstein provides a wistfully philosophical or meditative take on the 1930s as he touches the national culture in nearly every region of the creative and commercial arts. From a historiographical perspective, *Dancing in the Dark* is worth detailed attention; it registers, with a deft and generous balance, many of the broad tectonic shifts in academia occurring between the deluge of belligerent book titles, such as *Literature at the Barricades*, and the present.

Dickstein's tour-de-force skillfully transports the reader from grim tenements and the adversity of class and racial oppression to the dream-factories

of Hollywood make-believe; the somber sensibility expressing the pain of hard times in much social-realist fiction often dissolves into a mass culture of buoyant fantasies offering more than simple escape and distraction. *Dancing in the Dark* was rightfully received as recreating the 1930s landscape as a source of new hope, proof of our nation's ability to persevere, and even a light for our own troubled times. The profoundly nostalgic appeal of the book is not entirely unique; Conn, too, is preoccupied with the intriguing effort to connect the 1930s to "earlier American pasts" (8) and Eldridge ends with a wonderful chapter on "The Cultural Legacy of the 1930s" that treats its reconstruction up through the films *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *Seabiscuit* (2003), and *Cinderella Man* (2005).

Dancing in the Dark also serves as a commanding exemplification of the late-twentieth-century celebration of accomplishments past with an accent on the positive, especially in matters of gender, race, ethnicity, and mass or popular culture. Nevertheless, the overriding "dancing in the dark" metaphor for the culture obscures the fractious Marxist debates of the 1930s as a vital feature; and this surely removes any need for the author to make sense of and recoup revolutionary hopes – embraced by a substantial number of cultural workers he treats – in a contemporary manner that is fully aware of their vulnerabilities. More survey than treatise, Dickstein's approach forgoes even the germ of a radical restatement of the politico-cultural challenge to build a new world. He essentially combines a hopeful picture of artistic achievement with a bleak picture of social breakdown, and he is particularly original about the cathartic role of the former. When it comes to the revolutionary views embraced by so many of the Left cultural workers of the time, Dickstein acknowledges in passing some political and organizational affiliations but never imparts to us anything of the mental and moral universe of writers attracted to movements such as Communism. Instead of ending, canonically, on the shock of the Hitler–Stalin Pact of 1939 or the violent note of Pearl Harbor in 1941 – both of which raised unresolved dilemmas for the radical tradition – he closes on the hopeful promises of the World's Fair of 1939–1940. His rather chipper summary reads: "Artists and performers rarely succeed in changing the world, but they can change our feelings about the world, our understanding of it, the way we live in it. . . . Their work and serious play did much to ease the national trauma. They were dancing in the dark, moving in time to a music all their own, but the steps were magical."[3]

Cultural nostalgia, some of which is rooted in the happy personal associations to which Dickstein refers in autobiographical asides, seems to inflect the political template of the book when it comes to Communism, too. Certainly, he sees the Soviet-inspired hopes as an allure that crashed on the

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rocks of reality, but not much is said by way of explanation. The warmth and coping strategies provided by music, theater, film, dance, literature, and so forth are the main point. What we have are the conventional negative asides about Party hackery; this is perhaps overdone when he oddly declares the anti-intellectual Mike Gold (1894–1967) "the representative Communist intellectual of the twentieth century" (19), and then sums up Gold's later career with boilerplate invective as "a nasty propagandist who swallowed every shift and betrayal, every violent twist of policy the party sent his way" (21). But Dickstein's nostalgia successfully distances him from most liberal anticommunists and he is ultimately less censorious than quietly bemused. It is not merely that Communism, along with any other Far Left variants, is now a dead horse that there is no need to flog. Dickstein is writing as a mature and tolerant parent recalling a stage of wildness that his children have now – thankfully! – outgrown. His memories of their tantrums and acts of blatant disrespect and disobedience have mostly faded as he cheerfully attributes to them an achievement compatible with his current state of mind: "Like FDR himself they [the artists] boosted the people's morale, supplying a charge of social energy that also illuminated their works and days" (xxiii). If Dickstein succumbs more than Eldridge and Conn to the temptation to find dramatic unity through the imposition of a too-narrow theme, it is that 1930s culture serves as the analogue for New Deal politics and no further debate is necessary.

Dancing in the Dark, then, is a charming rendition of the 1930s as providing a kind of cultural Geritol to service the tired blood that comes with new anxieties. It is a sensible and credible book, but it promotes a connection to the 1930s distinct from what the Marxist literary debates of the 1930s can provide to the point of suggesting that his nostalgia works to mute a disconcerting relevance different from a warmth that facilitates coping. What is not communicated is a sense of shared belonging, across time, to a set of militant political and ethical values that still demand a conscious commitment to a redeeming future. The cultural power of the 1930s can be found in the cogency of articulation in the Marxist literary debates with regard to the concrete dilemmas of the period. These include a skeptical view of the New Deal liberalism, a passionate commitment to internationalism, and a belief that writers might create a new kind of literature for a new kind of audience. In its finest moments, these expressions of commitment transcend their own time. After all, the same old fight of property rights versus human rights vexes generation after generation, and now more than ever. For every student of the Great Depression whose reaction is to download CDs and DVDs of 1930s classic songs and films to assuage despair, there are others who come away inspired to set about the

project of developing a new and improved "cultural front" to counter a world of Trumps, Clintons, Putins, al-Asaads, and worse.

Dickstein, however, is the most open of the three to the radical presence. He does not go to the extreme of Eldridge, who explains that "the notion of the years 1930–39 as the 'Red Decade' does not stand up to scrutiny . . . [but] was a perception generated primarily by anti-Communists."[4] Nor of Conn, who says that he wrote the book "to argue against the currently, widely shared assumption that the 1930s were largely characterized in cultural terms by Left aesthetics and politics."[5] Both statements miss the point that the centrality of the role of "Reds" in the culture came not from their absolute numbers or sales figures. Rather, it was from the challenge that Red arguments presented to numerous others, and the fact that the matters addressed by Reds represent paradigmatic crises and conflicts of the modern era itself. A great deal of 1930s radical thinking exceeds this one decade; it is responsible for much of the longevity and current appeal of the 1930s. Moreover, there is also the literary quality of the writers drawn to the Red cause and the fact that much of their art is now regarded as fundamental to modern US culture. We still speak much of the language of the 1930s and political allegiances formed during the Great Depression and its aftermath are with us yet. *Dancing in the Dark* presents the indubitably rich topsoil of the 1930s cultural moment that includes a substantial radical presence; but we also require scholarship that reveals, from other angles, the personal choices and changes that actually powered the culture of the 1930s. Nostalgia is necessary but insufficient to explain why we are still affected by the ability of so many 1930s artists to recreate a specific landscape infused with decade-transcendent dreams. We must also drill to the bedrock of commitments that dare not speak their political names in a substantial portion of newer cultural histories of the subject.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Scholars

Between the earnest pioneering investigations of the 1930s, focusing on the agonies and antinomies of militant Marxist cultural commitment, and Dickstein's humane recreation of a sensibility of hope and perseverance, sits the long history of an uneven and combined development, both an enlargement and thinning of a beguiling field of study. The groundwork, however, was remarkably solid, based on primary research, interviews, and close reading of journals and newspapers; this occurred to a degree not always duplicated and to which it is always informative to return. As the Cold War era of McCarthyite demonization of the Left waned in the late 1950s, a cohort of Left-liberal scholars waged a struggle through academic books to establish

the 1930s as the centerpiece in a lengthier tradition of literary radicalism, a fractious movement that addressed complex and near insoluble problems facing "engaged" cultural workers: Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the U.S., 1900–1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (1956); Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961); and James B. Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (1968). Whereas the anticommunist Right and a section of Cold War liberals saw the crudity and delusions of 1930s radicalism as a causal factor of W. H. Auden's 1939 "low dishonest decade" ("September 1, 1939," *New Republic*, 1939), the new scholarship explained why intellectuals turned Left as the consequence of the crisis of a social system.

The three authors lacked political unanimity, adhered to many now-dated ideas about what constitutes "literature," and displayed an astounding blind spot about the Jewish presence in the literary Left. But they grasped the significance of the 1930s from the point of view of the question of whether United States citizens continued to live in a social order that required radical solutions. Behind their books churned the same question that arose in the 1930s literary debates among Marxists: Should intellectuals fight for profound structural changes benefitting all, and what might be the significance for cultural creativity and analysis? Rideout concluded by reaffirming that literature was not an "independent category," but he also saw it as "distinct" from politics in a way that the Communist movement could not recognize; if there was to be a future for the radical novel, it would be "almost wholly with the independent radical."[6] Gilbert insisted that the elevation of "negativism" destroyed the radicalism of *Partisan Review* magazine by the early 1950s;[7] he called upon the New Left to "understand" what must be "rejected" in the Old Left and rediscover "the compatibility of Bohemianism and radicalism which is reminiscent of Greenwich Village before World War I" (7). Most arresting were the final thoughts of Aaron: "We who precariously survive in the 1960s can regret [the Communist writers'] inadequacies and failures, their romanticism, their capacity for self-deception, their shrillness, their self-righteousness. It is less easy to scorn their efforts, however blundering and effective, to change the world."[8]

What came after produced a truly a positive and stunning shift from which we now benefit: a near endless proliferation of well-crafted studies of literary and cultural radicalism, often extending the bookends of the 1930s. These perform the crucial work of reintroducing forgotten or misunderstood cultural works and provide narratives from perspectives that steadily enrich our understanding of what occurred in context and what it all means. Surprisingly, despite undying anticommunism among the general public, many

studies appear to be characterized by politics suggestive of the Popular Front fellow travelers of the late 1930s combined with neo-Marxist critical terms. (Dickstein, Conn, and Eldridge are exceptions to the latter.) Whatever one thinks of that combination, this expansion was necessary and indispensable.

The earlier books by Aaron et al. must be faulted for a limited selection of cultural workers and cultural sites, too often white males and New York focused, and for failing to recognize the masculinized discourse of leading Left thinkers. Moreover, it was necessary for subsequent scholars to challenge, in general histories, any overfixation on Marxists running the 1930s; no one can seriously argue that the Left commitment of intellectuals and their debates about aesthetics, philosophy, and politics should be the only story if our concern is the culture consumed by the total population of the United States. Every year of the 1930s was crowded with immense political and intellectual change beyond the class, race, and international preoccupations of the urban intelligentsia; and when we expand a field, we invariably see new and potentially helpful patterns at work. Finally, the notion that the radical literary movement of the Great Depression was a failure, promoted primarily by Left critics of the Communists such as *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv (1908–1973), had to be displaced.

What appears to account for retarding the pursuit of the meaning of Marxist literary debates, the clarification of commitment, and the reclamation of the roots of an independent revolutionary socialism, is the mood that swept academia as the 1970s became the 1980s. Rideout, Aaron, and Gilbert were never directly challenged or refuted in any important way, but the decline of New Left social movements, the disappearance of radical political organizations, the growth of various types of "identity politics," the appearance of a new version of social democracy that embraced Popular Front culture, the triumph of literary theories that diminished the role of authors and placed structure above agency, combined to propel scholarship in new directions. Warren Susman's essays "Culture and Commitment" (1973) and "The Culture of the 1930s" (1983), powerfully introduced the notion that the Marxist Left was a lesser presence than had been thought. A brilliant disciple, Richard Pells, extended the concept in *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (1973), where he managed to incorporate the debates of Marxists in his work while bending this material to a countervailing theme: "though their intentions were innovative and radical, it is possible to see (particularly in the years after 1935) an underlying conservatism in their outlook as well as in the implications of their ideas."[9]

Even more persuasive was Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996). With a

Jedi-like mastery, Denning incorporated a large number of discussions among the literary Left, although he excluded those explicitly about Stalinism and the Russian Revolution. In his boldest move, one that constituted a major advance for the field, 1930s radicalism was persuasively extended as an "historical bloc" (a union of social forces) into the 1950s. Then Denning swiveled to a surprising direction with the following claim: "the culture and politics of the Popular Front [historical bloc] were not simply New Deal Liberalism and populism. It was a social democratic culture, a culture of 'industrial democracy' and 'industrial unionism'."[10] With "Cultural Front," "Popular Front," and "The Age of the CIO" all coterminous with social democracy, Denning allied himself with the tendency to homogenize and marginalize the often specific varieties and experiences of commitment permeating the Left. That so many, perhaps the majority, of cultural figures claimed for social democratic culture actually despised social democracy is a problem Denning never satisfactorily clarifies.

In presenting the Cultural Front as a usable past, part of Denning's argument is that a scholar's identification of certain kinds of commitment as "Communist" likely leads to a core-periphery model, which is "commonly told as a morality tale of seduction and betrayal" (xvii) and "ultimately a search for Moscow gold" (xviii). Thus, an interpretative loophole was put in place that too easily allows scholars to take an easy way out. Why wrestle with all the paradoxes and contradictions of a committed writer's location when one can dismiss the research into their ideological and organizational choices as irrelevant, if not a Red-baiting concession to anticommunist conspiracy theorists? In fact, Denning's strategy never erased the problem of Stalinism, a permanent blot, but simply outsourced the subject to others with less sympathy and understanding of Left history.

Speaking of Communists

Although some works of the late twentieth century simply ignore the tradition of Marxist literary debates, books by Pells and Denning set out to manage them in various ways. Or perhaps it is more accurate to observe that these studies provided openings that could go in various directions, but that a frequent one was a tendency to embrace the less complicated themes. This explains the pattern that has coalesced: A celebration of simpler kinds of political commitment in which a writer's association with "The Left" is treated more often as a quick alignment than a thought-out choice; a view that an emergent independent Marxism in the 1930s was actually anticommunist or a necessary transit to Cold War liberalism and neoconservatism; and an understanding of the Communist presence that was vague

and devoid of substance precisely at the time when new primary research – especially politically-revised biographies of Agnes Smedley (1892–1950), Jim Thompson (1906–1977), Arthur Miller (1915–2005), Ralph Ellison (1913–1994), and Langston Hughes – suggested that our notion of the Communist writer and the Communist presence needed to be broadened.

The notion that identifying writers as pro-Communist and pursuing the matter with any depth is a way of pigeonholing artists and narrowing 1930s culture is primarily a matter of what is in the eye of the beholder. As with any biographical or personal information about a cultural figure – including his or her sexual orientation, a childhood trauma, a grievous loss – the issue is what the scholar *does* with it. If one sees Communism reductively as a monotone, and Party members as wooden stereotypes, perhaps it is better to claim that most writers of the 1930s weren't really Communists and move to another subject. But there is abundant evidence to suggest that the communist cultural movement was vibrant and peopled with colorful characters. Moreover, it does violence to reality to ignore that the 1930s literary radical was primarily Soviet centered and the Communist Party was a determinant in the way that many literary radicals thought – far beyond the actual Party membership and even beyond fellow travelers.

The explanation for such devotion is not just the economic crisis but that the Soviet Union, from the time of the 1917 Revolution, was a genuine beacon for racial, ethnic, and national equality. Radical writers in the United States *wanted* to make the prestige of the USSR their own; they did not need to be duped or pressured into such loyalty, even if fear of persecution induced many to be cautious about public declarations. Communist militants were admired by literary radicals for the guiding role they played in social movements and trade unions, for fighting racism and anti-Semitism. As a result of Communist propaganda and activity there was a strong internationalist presence on the US Left; events and upheavals in remote corners of world received attention that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Even when collaborating with liberalism in the Popular Front, Communists were in the vanguard of social transformation. For those mainly inspired by the Soviet Union as a working model of a future society, the Communist Party played a mediating role. Finally, despite dogmatism of many Party spokespersons in cultural matters, in creative practice the ideology of Communists could be fluid and flexible. This is especially critical to cultural production; none of the substantial cultural works of the era are reducible to the pro-Soviet version of communism.

Yet there is something more. The Marxist literary debates of the 1930s remain a potential source of encouragement for creative scholars as well as cultural activists inspired by a Marxism liberated from the past. This will

only come through candid understanding of the older mixed record and the crafting of new forms of commitment; otherwise, we will be like amnesiacs, lost when we should have some knowledge of the terrain, and more helpless than ever if we wish to derail the train to disillusionment. Cultural issues raised in the 1930s are already in discussion, even if their earlier background is not fully appreciated. One concerns the technologies of representation – who does the cultural representing and how? The 1930s arguments about "the proletarian novel" suggest the need to differentiate between the creation of proletarian experience in a text – which long predated the 1930s – and a vanguard cultural tendency that can explore its own aesthetic, freely developing forms and language without the interference of political watch-dogs. Young people who today are launching new journals and experimenting with the promotion of social movements, can look back to these old disputes to learn how one might do effective work from the fringes. Above all, these 1930s literary debates are rich with regard to the whole complicated and still-unresolved matter of possible connections between social beliefs and literary aims; everything may be political, but the primacy of political experience has been a poor guide to understanding the principles of artistic creativity and aesthetic achievement.

Methodologies must also be refined; the scholar should be able to zoom in on personal lives and the implications for art, but also to zoom out and tell more about the place of 1930s radicalism in the greater culture. A superior unity of cultural history and intellectual history seems required as well. If Marxism continues to be the guide, it must be one that commands a dizzying array of approaches – historical, aesthetic, psychological, cultural, political, sociological. Finally, as we pass the one-hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, scholars in that field have been hard at work in the effort to understand what was positive about the event, what went wrong, and why. This research, often revealing new data that resists containment within inherited storylines, can be a critical counterpoint to some of the narrative myths about 1930s literary radicalism that reappear with deadening monotony. If one has no sense of what might have been "real" in this once-profound attraction of US writers to the communist cause, it's hard to know what to care about when estimating their legacy. One cannot expect that answers to such matters will be certain and beyond dispute, that all paradoxes will be settled; but to isolate the material of fact and experience from reconsiderations of literary radicalism is to absolve ourselves from thinking about the history that matters.

NOTES

1 Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Literature, 1929–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 7.
2 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 200, 204.
3 Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010), 530.
4 David Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 8.
5 Peter Conn, *The American 1930s: A Literary History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6.
6 Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 290.
7 James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Radical America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 282.
8 Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), 396.
9 Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), xii.
10 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), xvii.