Summary and Keywords

At the start of the last century a modern tradition of literary radicalism crystallized with inspiring results. From 1900 onward, socialists and bohemians yoked their ideals to become a marathon of forward-thinking activist cultural workers. For the next three decades, writers and intellectuals of the Left, such as Max Eastman (1883–1969), were oracles of enchantment in a world increasingly disenchanted, initially by the international war of 1914–1919 and subsequently by a decline in popular political defiance as capitalism consolidated. Still, the adversarial dream persevered during the violence and later, often in little magazines such as the Masses, Liberator, Seven Arts, and Modern Quarterly. Since the 1920s, literary radicalism meant creativity in the service of an insurrection against political power combined with a makeover in human relationships.
With the economic catastrophe of 1929 and the triumph of Nazism in 1933, what might have been a generational succession morphed into a paradigm shift. This previously self-governing literary radicalism was now multifariously entangled with Soviet communism during its most awful hour. An unofficial state of emergency escalated so that a range of journals—this time, *New Masses, Modern Monthly, and Partisan Review*—once more served as barometers of the depth and breadth of radical opinion. Bit by bit, a strange new ethos enveloped the literary Left, one that blended heroism, sacrifice, and artistic triumph with fifteen years of purge trials in the Soviet Union, mortifying policy shifts in the international Communist movement, and relentless domestic repression against the organized Left in the United States. By the end of this phase, in the reactionary post–World War II years, most adherents of communism (not just the pre-dominant pro-Soviet Communism, but the other varieties of communism such as Trotskyism and Bukharinism) desperately fled their Depression-era affiliations. The upshot was a blurring of the record. This occurred in ways that may have seemed clever for autobiographical concealment (by one-time literary radicals who feared exposure or embarrassment at youthful excesses) but became maddening for future scholars wishing to parse the writers’ former convictions.

As literary radicalism passed through the Cold War, 1960s radicalization, the late 20th-century culture wars, and into the new millennium, the tradition was routinely reframed so that it faces us today as a giant puzzle. New research and scholarship emerge every year to provide insights into a very complicated body of writing, but there is a fretful ambivalence about its actual location and weight in literary history. Not surprisingly, most overall scholarly histories, chronicles, and anthologies do not include the category of literary radicalism as a well-defined, principal topic. This is because enthusiasts of the last twenty-five years brilliantly championed the tradition less under the rubric of “literary radicalism” than as the fertile soil for a blooming of gender-conscious, multicultural, and polycentric legacies connected to the Left but primarily rendered as eruptions of American literary modernity onto the world stage. These revisionist images came to us in discrete volumes about black writers, women writers, regional writers, children’s writers, Jewish writers, and so forth. Nonetheless, such celebratory portraits remained in competition with a dark double, a notion that nearly all literary radicals were wanting in artistic value. This skeptical appraisal was entrenched in an older scholarship, a point of view that is partly an aftereffect of the long shadow that the Communist imbroglio cast on its entire legacy.

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The history of literary radicalism is a text we are forever revising, a tradition in search of an identity. The old-fashioned mythology of literary radicalism as a few bright sails on a sea of mediocrity tends to provide the comforts of the familiar names and concepts, while revisionist efforts to repossess a part of the past rely more often on the shock of the new. Nonetheless, both enterprises respond in their own fashions—whether sympathetic or adversarial—to a still-commanding configuration of the language and theology of liberal and conservative anti-communism. This governing, rhetorical template is typically joined with canonical genre and aesthetic distinctions that became utterly institutionalized during the early Cold War years, although backing for the combination is keener today in intellectual history circles than among literary theorists. The central aim of this article is to keep the possibility of a “third way” in mind—between obstinate loyalists to a postwar sensibility and the more elusive revisionists—while mapping the historical emergence and evolution of the beguiling trend of literary radicalism. The focus will be on six contested issues: (1) the framework of the discussion and its alternatives; (2) the methodological dialectic of intimate and epic; (3) the centrality of romantic anti-capitalism to the foundation of literary radicalism; (4) the ambiguities of "commitment"; (5) the antinomies of "Communist" identity (specifically pro-Soviet whenever the term is capitalized);
and (6) the new queries triggered by the changing terrain in the aftermath of the 1960s and late 20th-century culture wars.

The Weight of Obsolescent Furniture

One sees the prevailing sensibility that was formed after World War II quite plainly in a representative passage from "Aesthetics of the Proletarian Novel" by Frederick J. Hoffman, a well-known scholar shaped by the older school: "The proletarian novels … of the Thirties now mainly exist as period pieces … The fiction of [James T.] Farrell, [John] Steinbeck, and [John] Dos Passos survives them, and this is largely because it was superior work, less given to formulas … None of these is a first-rate writer, but all of them offer a literature that resists the confinement of an ideological source and explanation."¹ Reiterations of this sort, found with numbing regularity, can render even the most exciting material dull, a bit of a meh from the outset.

The weight of this obsolescent furniture—the mantra that literary radicalism is mostly corrupted by ideology, and the very best is still second rate—remains heavy even among those scholars who are in rebellion against the canon and its legitimatizing suppositions. The ritualistic recycling of what are by now slothful clichés can shape the terms of the reactions and strategies of revision in the manner that initial arguments against racism in the abolitionist era were limited by a need to counter the "naturalized" assumptions and claims of white supremacists. Here is how one work published in the early new millennium responds: "In literature departments in America during the early Cold War 'political art' was either a contradiction in terms or a reminder of the discredited work of the 1930s left, a literature that was generally dismissed as doctrinaire and party line, lacking in linguistic and imaginative energy and committed to a dated and dangerous Communist line … I hope to show that … political art has a continuing power to engage contemporary readers."² What is explicit here is who is setting the terms of debate. Nevertheless, some revisionist rebuttals are willing to acknowledge that there are fraught and destabilizing problems, due to political pressures in radical culture, even while others sidestep the complications and take the tack that such allegations are little more than anti-communist Cold War claptrap.³

There are reasons, however, to genuinely think beyond this established mode of discourse, which converts a lively topic into one that comes off as either well chewed over by spoilers or unsophisticated cheerleading by champions. An alternative approach must affirm that the peculiar mode in which writers on the Left established themselves throughout the 20th century obliges the scholar to suspend beliefs in many of the expected assumptions.⁴ If criticism is to be a mind reaching out, the 21st-century scholar must function like a jazz composer, always rousing oneself to seek new elements, contexts, and sets of strategies. In a sense, this was always the true calling of the critic—one defends the life of art because art enhances life.

What is problematic in the work of the older school is not the nature of the particular concerns that dominated earlier inquiries, which includes fair questions about ideology and artistic freedom. It was the definitions employed, evidence accepted, and cultural sites targeted. If some of the artistic or political faults found in literary radicalism by the old school were pumped up to magnify their significance, some revisionist versions of the Left have put on blinders of their own to defend literary radicalism mainly as uplifting and ennobling. That is why scholarship with the greatest hope for reconstituting the tradition is dedicated to investigating outside the frame of the body of writing that was hitherto deemed representative of what radicals were supposed to have produced.⁵ A surprising amount of poetry, fiction, and drama of the Left were prematurely exiled from the tradition because they didn't behave as critics
imagined that radical text were supposed to behave; classic typologies of literary radicalism, including some from the Left, generalized from a small number of creative writings or a few manifestos rather than from the bottom up by starting with whatever radicals produced. The new research has taught us that much was missed or misread because a writer’s politics weren’t overt in the text in the stock manner. Such a muddying may have been because the author wrote genre fiction or wrote modernist poems not customarily associated with the Left’s self-proclaimed movement of “People’s Poetry,” or simply because he or she intentionally desired to pass on misleading clues about political beliefs so as not to be pigeonholed.

The accumulation of original data about what was published and who qualifies as a literary radical necessitates a fresh approach to symphonic composition, not simply the rearrangement of musical notes in a slightly different melody. We need to look again at what we have assumed to be the recurring topics that have shaped the narrative arcs of genres within the tradition—beyond the standard list of bottom dog stories, defeated strikes, and political conversions. Sometimes it is preferable, in navigating a history filled with gaps and dark warrens, to blast open new chasms rather than wobble on substandard bridges. Other times one should let ingenuity shine forth and be satisfyingly inconclusive. All the signs are that literary radicalism, retheorized as evolving and contradictory, has a far more extensive presence in U.S. literature than we have permitted ourselves to recognize.

It would be impossible, of course, to approach this hot-button topic as a clean slate, but one must also have the capacity to stroke literary history against the grain, approach the tradition at a slant, and stay attuned to its uncertainties and contingencies. After all, literary radicalism was never committed to asserting itself as a normative trend within conventional literary annals. Practitioners saw themselves as a vanguard that conceived of its politically committed art—characteristically documentary and visionary in equal measure—as the entrance to a new way of thinking. The writers wanted to do something exceptional; they wished to address how capitalism distorts psychological and social existence. This included for them zones we have tended to overlook such as a history of emotional reactions they often crafted, sometimes through a countertheme of disassurance that is evident in the minor characters and lesser episodes, as in works by Ann Petry (1908–1997), Jo Sinclair (1913–1995), and Abraham Polonsky (1910–1999). It was only the narrowest of critics, regardless of their politics, who forged a response to this broad and intricate theater of artistic struggle by fixating on one putative literary form or another (such as naturalism) as the privileged mode of expression by which to celebrate or condemn.

Most radical fiction writers opted in practice for novels and stories featuring both social realist and modernist forms; they are essentially hybrids, unusual alchemies of style that mark the indeterminate categories sometimes called “proletarian literature” and the “collective novel.” Others operated within popular genre fiction (the historical novel, science fiction, and detective pulp) or exhibited high-brow establishment credentials (by winning Guggenheims and dominating the Yale Younger Poets series for over a decade). What is proof of the accuracy of the literary radicals’ claim that their true contribution was to new thinking—about commodification, reification, race, gender, and class—is that so much of the substance of even the oldest contributions to literary radicalism has not grown foreign even as styles and sensibilities have changed. The vocabulary of the contemporary academic Left has obviously altered due to an infusion of literary terms from postmodernist discourse, but vast amounts of fiction, poetry, and drama from the legacy of the literary Left have been reprinted—not only neglected classics (e.g., Agnes Smedley’s Daughter of Earth, 1929), but outstanding books that received too little attention at the time (e.g., Alexander Saxton’s The Great Midland, 1948). There are even available previously unpublished and unfinished book-length manuscripts, often with an unpolished appeal, by writers of varying reputations such as Sanora Babb (1907–2005), Carlos Bulosan (1913–1956), Tillie Olsen (1912–2007), Meridel Le Sueur (1900–1996), Amércico Paredes (1915–
The preponderance of the scholars introducing, editing, and writing about this material are partisans of present-day literary radicalism who discover far more to embrace than repudiate in literature that their Cold War-era predecessors had mostly dismissed.

Intimate and Epic

Methodologically, what is decisively challenging for the study of literary radicalism is that it is at once intimate and epic. The apprehension of the artistic strategy deployed and the experience depicted requires a dual journey into the inner lives of writers and their involvement in social history—in other words, a trip that takes one deep into the universe of distinctive single consciousnesses and also along the terrain of an equally challenging landscape of political strife. Yet to identify this tradition too closely with particular literary figures alone is to miss the point. It was also established on foundations of social movements and ideologies more solid than the force of individual personality. The ideas of the inspirational movements, moreover, are not simple and require empathetic inquiry; to make sense of the thinking and behavior of writers engaged in communism, Trotskyism, socialism, and anarchism from an arm’s length or liberal or conservative mindset is like trying to make sense of spiritual practices of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, or Islam and Hinduism, in the terms and symbols of Christianity. The writing of literary radicals might be more accurately seen as the product of a quadrilateral love affair: among the writer’s personal psychology, friends and lovers, politics and ideology, and the mysterious passion to create. One must also keep in mind that the different aspects of a person’s life don’t always coincide.

Literary radicalism from this perspective is marked by extreme fluidity of form; its styles and genres, including those derived from naturalist and social realist exemplars, can be complex, meandering, and braided. Some of the negative critiques are accurate but exaggerated and so distort an intricate backstory. For example, one can certainly find some writers clinging to artificial and formulaic language, soullessly spitting out canned lines that they imagined to be required by uplifting working-class politics; Howard Fast’s *Clarkton* (1947) is one example. Moreover, pressure to speak directly, and stay off topics such as one’s messy self or unhappy past, influenced those who desired a public voice, especially in antifascist writing such as Aaron Kramer’s “Blood Donation” (1943). Yet most literary radicals were legitimately within modernism’s contested terrain in the sense of accepting poetry and prose as language experiments, ones that could create new speech, expressions, and vistas, often confounding knee-jerk genre classifications. Langston Hughes (1902–1967), a poet, dramatist, and fiction writer who spoke through a multiplicity of voices, is somewhat typical in cloaking his sophistication in deceptively simple language. Whereas the scholars rooted in the older perspective tend to cast out the political radicals from modernism, the more recent books see the radicals as telling a different story of it.

The most conservative partisans of the older methodology—usually journalists or scholars outside the literary disciplines—hunt for signs of Marxist commitment in a Javert-like pursuit of culpability; Arthur Miller (1915–2005) and Lillian Hellman (1905–1984) are disparaged as “Stalinists,” a term with minimal connection to their creative achievements. In contrast, the most slippery revisionists often soft-pedal the realities of Communist policy and practice, presenting the same writers as New Deal liberals, “progressives,” or most frequently as being of “the Left,” which thins out the imaginative work in misleading ways. Such matters require more subtlety and generosity than the former can muster and more candor than the latter seem willing to admit. An evenhanded framework is required.

Yes, there is a tendency for Marxist political organizations—such as the Communist one to which Miller and Hellman
gave allegiance in the 1930s and '40s—to induce homogeneity, especially in periods of intense political strife that bring out fanaticism, authoritarianism, and oversimplification. The worst example is the Cultural Commission of the Communist Party, which acted like a toy firing squad when it came to the Trotskyist heretics of *Partisan Review* magazine in 1937 and former fellow travelers who favored U.S. intervention into World War II during the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939–41. Moreover, criticisms from well-known Left reviewers did sting radical artists who didn't like being targets; the creative writers themselves made formal pronouncements on behalf of now-dubious Soviet policies that reveal self-importance and overconfidence, and one can detect a propaganda facet in some literary works. Yet the goal of political agitation was not the sole incentive for literary expression for these writers and others; creative practice itself was rarely cowed into monolithicism by such zeal, and the imaginations of radicals cannot be reduced to epiphenomena of policy changes or a misguided reading of Soviet actions. One must turn to the art itself, not the manifestos, for evidence.

Moreover, there were always those radicals, many quite close to the Communist movement, who spoke in their writing from the depths of solitude, expressing a lonely confrontation with the real. One of the greatest, Kenneth Fearing (1902–1961), had the trademark of expressing his poems in a cool, sardonic tone. Among his contemporaries, Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980) was attracted to the visionary language of Hart Crane, while Stanley Burnshaw (1906–2005) was drawn to the dialogue-narratives of Robert Frost, and Joseph Kalar (1906–1972) partook of the acute awareness of the physical world of Thomas Hardy. Marcel Proust was the secret sharer of novelist James T. Farrell (1904–1979), Gertrude Stein of Richard Wright, and Henry James of Robert Cantwell (1908–1978).

Any new account of literary radicalism must carefully combine historical sweep, ideological sophistication, candid biography, and an equalitarian approach to mediums. Beyond that, there is the challenge that literary radicalism, although aspiring to aid the struggles of labor in the United States, was increasingly a global phenomenon comprising distinctly flavored local components. It traversed dissimilar eras most conspicuously marked by romantic anti-capitalism in the 1920s with European as well as indigenous influences; pro-Soviet communism in the 1930s with fronts in Spain and throughout the colonial world; and New Left insurgencies in the 1960s animated by an international youth revolt. Literary radicalism was often in crisis, always beleaguered, sometimes stained (as in the Communist leaderships’ attacks on Albert Maltz [1908–1985] in 1945), but never defeated. There were several flood tides and crises, yet one finds no tidy parable of a rise and fall. Nonetheless, it is a blunder to treat the historical canvas as an abstract expressionist painting in which the compositional elements are given equal weight. The finger of enquiry must point persistently ad fontes for a new narrative, to the clarifying sources of the tradition that evince over time a nuanced interplay with historical context, intellectual transition, and the anxieties of identity.

The tradition’s kickoff was the pre–World War I affiliation between a bare-knuckle class-based collectivist movement and an irreverent nonconformist cultural revolt. Shaped by urban industrialization and the appearance of Marxian thought, the workers movement was given voice by the 1901 formation of the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs (1865–1926) and 1905 foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World of William D. (“Big Bill”) Haywood (1869–1928). Inspired by dreams of personal liberation and creative innovation, Greenwich Village artists and intellectuals stormed the barricades of Puritanism and Victorianism through the writings and cultural activism of Eastman, Randolph Bourne (1886–1918), V. F. Calverton (aka George Goetz, 1900–1940), Dorothy Day (1897–1981), Floyd Dell (1887–1969), Crystal Eastman (1881–1928), Waldo Frank (1889–1967), Joseph Freeman (1897–1965), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), Mike Gold (born Itzok Isaac Granich, 1894–1967), Emma Goldman (1869–1940), Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962), Claude McKay (1889–1948), John Reed (1887–1920), Genevieve
Taggard (1894–1948), John Reed (1887–1920), Jean Toomer (1894–1967), and many others. Although certain critical figures and episodes have been revived and reconsidered in recent books, the specifically radical strain of the era as a whole erroneously remains cast in the part of an episode, a precursor to what would come in the Depression. Nonetheless, while there are certainly grounds for regarding aspects of early 20th-century radical culture as transitional, perhaps even naïve and innocent, the core of what was established was never broken or fully transcended to this day. Some elements remarkably foreshadow events to come—the militancy of the New Negro Movement right after the war, the rallying of intellectuals to defend the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti in the mid-’20s. Hindsight can deceive as well as clarify when it presents an overly focused narrative—in this case, an irresponsible 1920s waiting for the straightjacket of the 1930s—that is too teleological. To appreciate the period before the Depression in terms of its specific accomplishments and beliefs, a robust romantic anti-capitalism needs to be recognized as the major thread interweaving a colorful mosaic of this cast of complicated personae.

The Dream of a Society Transformed

What literary radicalism put into play before 1929 and retained in its DNA ever after was the dream of a society transformed, a revolution cooperatively in politics, personal relations, and art that would produce an integral, unalienated humanity. Over the ensuing decades, an ongoing if fractious tradition preserved the underlying core values of the early phase even as leaders were replaced, constituents altered, and the social and economic landscape of the United States was transformed by booms, depressions, international wars, technology, radicalizations and reactions. From the beginning to the present, literary radicalism was a passionate calling, not linked to an institutionalized profession, although there has been a steady migration of adherents into publishing, university teaching, and other occupations with varying consequences.

Literary radicals are dreamers with an addiction to reality. As activists, most of them affiliate with organizations and social movements; in their art they purport to reject narcissistic aestheticism (art for art’s sake, the view that the special merit of aesthetic creativity is that it is useless) in favor of a humanizing culture of social redemption. They often come together as generations of young writers who aimed to rattle the ramparts of power and mobilize the politically committed along with the socially disenfranchised by creating art that would undeceive anyone in thrall to myths of capitalist society. Their alternative social vision sometimes urges them to include prophetic voices of authority in their poetry, drama, and fiction, and now and then they recreate heroes and heroines past and present who might jolt us into apprehending the possibilities of social action.

There are a variety of reasons why so many of the pioneering radical figures of the first three decades of the last century qualify as anti-capitalist romantics. All shared the vision of the social order transformed, a revolution in politics, art, and sex together. One might imagine the future as inscribed in the evocation of a pre-capitalist era, another might essay to recover paradise in the present through mystic feelings or passionate love, and a third might simply see the recollection of the past as a weapon in the struggle for the future. For the most part they, like their frequently shared inspirer Walt Whitman, held nature to be a source of wisdom and the social order as essentially a partnership of human beings united by communal affections. The upshot was a structure of feeling uniting all these radicals, who were frequently inspired by each other’s work.

Like so many European romantics, U.S. literary radicals of the pre-Depression era were less a group than a scatter of temperamental, variously talented, and sometimes irascible individuals. The emotions of romantic love felt for an
individual might be transferred to a romantic love of oppressed classes and internationalist political movements of which they had limited firsthand knowledge. Comparable to the early 18th-century romantic poets, they were before World War I transitional writers, moving toward the next major movement—which turned out to be catalyzed by the Russian Revolution, although identification with Bolshevism remained loose and uneven for a decade. Paul Strand (1890–1976) was one bohemian of the 1920s who became a longtime Communist photographer of great fame; he was originally inspired by the varieties of romantic anti-capitalism promoted by the literary work of Van Wyck Brooks (1886–1963), Waldo Frank, and Paul Rosenfeld (1890–1946) on the Seven Arts magazine of 1916–17.

Even in the case of the influences of this well-known cultural circle, there are critical variations to be acknowledged; Brooks and Frank believed that culture would play an active role in social transformation, while Rosenfeld saw art as separate from the common experience of life. Moreover, Frank, who stood very much for a politico-cultural socialist vanguard, focused chiefly on visionary figures such as photographer Alfred Steiglitz (1864–1946) rather than everyday politics. To Frank, capitalism was a rabble of individuals striving for personal power, the amorphousness of its social life a sign of its lack of wholeness. As a remedy he promoted a romantic anti-capitalism envisioning a dialectical relationship between an organic European culture expressed in medieval Christendom and a modern U.S. culture struggling to be born. He admired Marx but felt that too many Marxists used capitalist thinking by concentrating on production and not consumption.

Frank’s first novel, *The Unwelcome Man* (1917), was openly immersed in the ideas of transcendentalism, and by 1921 he and his friend Jean Toomer, a socialist as well, were drawn to the study of Eastern religions. Frank, however, pulled back, while Toomer, earlier the author of the romantic anti-capitalist *Cane* (1923), evolved to become a disciple of the spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff. Many of Frank’s views were more closely shared by Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), now best known as a philosopher of technology, but in 1919 an associate editor of the modernist *Dial*. Mumford’s *The Golden Day* (1926) was a celebration of 1850s American romanticism, and both men explored the crisis of capitalist civilization in depth by counterpoising concepts of wholeness to the modern fragmentation of humanity. Such an approach can form a bridge to Marxist notions of alienation and disalienation.

It was only a matter of time and changing circumstances before many such thinkers would start looking for political groups promoting programs that seemed to be the equivalent of such cultural ideals. For Frank and Mumford, this turned out to be the Communist Party until 1937 and 1939, respectively.

To be sure, such romantic anti-capitalism was not classical Marxism, but U.S. literary radicalism embodies to this day a vagueness about the properties of political power and social class, and there remains among sundry radicals a mystical strain of communitarianism such as the type that mesmerized Brooks and Frank. Many streams flooded into 1920s radicalism, reviving and revitalizing the new sensibility emerging in the late 18th century associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and then flourishing in the mid-19th century; what is critical is that U.S. radicals of that time understood the notion that there are public roots to our private dissatisfactions to be addressed through collective social transformation of the economy. Simply put, literary radicals were in opposition to and revulsion against capitalist modernity.

For Frank and most of the others, even with their otherwise divergent traits and disparate personalities, anti-capitalism is a dominant trait. They were a family of intellectuals united not so much by a single style of thinking as a common worldview. Eastman, for example, was probably closer to Marx in owing more of his thinking to the philosophy of the Enlightenment than to the romantic critique of industrial civilization. But the romantic perspective may have helped Eastman and others like him to a balanced perception as neither apologetic for the brutalities of capitalist modernity nor blind to its palpable achievements. In his one novel of the 1920s, *Venture* (1927), Eastman
depicts his protagonist (part John Reed and part Bill Haywood) as a left-wing romantic Prometheus inspired by a cult of progress. Versions of romantic anti-capitalism were to remain in the literary Left like songs seared into its soul.

**Commitment and Its Discontents**

Literary radicalism, of course, was profoundly affected by the ensuing era of Communist hegemony, roughly 1929 to 1958. A clear chronological demarcation is tricky because attraction to Bolshevism actually began with the October 1917 Revolution, becoming less focused during the 1920s. The Communist cultural presence steamrolled to high pitch at the time of the Popular Front of the late 1930s; yet it might have been greater in the 1940s had it not been for the obfuscation of its identity by blending so seamlessly into antifascist culture. The mainstream of outstanding World War II novels, for example, is essentially an outgrowth of the pro-Communist tradition: Stefan Heym’s *The Crusaders* (1948), Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Irwin Shaw’s *The Young Lions* (1948), Leon Uris’s *Battle Cry* (1953), and John Oliver Killens’s *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962).

The Communist cultural movement was still the prevailing trend in literary radicalism into the 1950s. But it was forced to camouflage itself even more through the euphemism “progressive” in response to its beleaguered situation as the chief target of J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy. The radical literature of the 1950s became split between a remnant that retained confidence in the official Communist movement and those whose Communism was increasingly heterodox due to skepticism about the pro-Soviet movement and its vision of the world. Novelists in the first group included Lloyd Brown (1913–2003), Philip Bonosky (1916–2013), Howard Fast (1914–2003), Stephan Heym (1913–2001), Albert Maltz, and Philip Stevenson (1912–1968). What they wrote were often well-crafted novels of strikes and political prisoners, although Fast distinguished himself through best-selling historical fiction. Those who had stepped back from the Party, although still radical and adhering to a Marxian vision, were most remarkable for their phantasmagorias of fractured perception, figures searching for wholeness, and experiences of authority divorced from responsibility. These elements can be seen in works such as Norman Mailer’s *Barbary Shore* (1951), Carlos Bulosan’s *The Cry and the Dedication* (1995, published posthumously), Ann Petry’s *The Narrows* (1953), Nelson Algren’s *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1950), Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953), and Abraham Polonsky’s *The World Above* (1951). Modernist images of the U.S. Communist experience began to infiltrate the culture without being recognized as such, a broken and discontinuous subterranean narrative that was part of an unspoken consciousness. Add to this the poetry of Thomas McGrath, which aggressively mourns the depletion of organized working-class resistance, and Left writing was growing darker and more introverted. Perhaps it required identification as a new genre, one that might be called Communist literary modernism. In this literature can be found the story of the hidden emotions of a social world disfigured by repression and fear.

Unexpectedly, the Communist tradition went on to have a remarkable literary afterlife following the near-collapse of U.S. Communist institutions two years after the Khrushchev revelations of Stalin’s crimes in 1956. This spirit world in letters arose through a mixture of absorbing books by former Communists and those with Communist family members and friends: E. L. Doctorow (1931–2015), Bert Gilden (1915–1971), Katya Gilden (1914–1991), John Oliver Killens (1916–1987), Warren Miller (1921–1966), Tillie Olsen (1912–2007), Chaim Potok (1919–2002), John Sanford (1904–2003), Clancy Sigal (b. 1926), Margaret Walker (1915–1998), Helen Yglesias (1915–2008), and José Yglesias (1919–1995). Next came the steadily escalating republication of Communist-era writings and of new
sideral books sympathetically treating cultural figures of the Old Left. This endurance and reclamation of a post-Communist literary radicalism that was still in some sense linked to Communism has made it difficult to grasp the distinct contours of the newer generation that followed; not only the movement produced by the New Left in the 1960s, but the succeeding series of semi-independent but interlinked social movements around Latin American solidarity, feminism, gay and lesbian rights, South African liberation, the environment, the Occupy movement, and Palestinian rights. Writers died out, but what they had written was still in circulation, and new experiences reverberated with the older core of the tradition.

What imparts to the 1930s era a special importance is a combination of factors: the relatively frank expression of revolutionary ideas in the early 1930s, which was still present after 1935 as part of the diversity of the Popular Front; the widespread organization of cultural workers locally, nationally, and internationally; and the high quality of prose, poetry, drama, and Left magazines of the era, not only those that achieved recognition at the time but some that came to be valued in retrospect. Finally, the 1930s is distinctive for the way in which the notion of “commitment” took shape. Whereas Marxists such as Raymond Williams see all literary work as “aligned,” in the sense of expressing “explicitly or implicitly, specifically selected experience from a specific point of view,” “commitment” is a “conscious, active, and open … choice of position.”

Prior to the 1930s, the notion of commitment was nebulous because no one knew exactly where it might lead; what existed was a multifarious yet complexly plaited presence of writers of a Left-wing disposition with some belonging to organizations that were usually divided into factions. Starting in the 1930s, commitment seemed to be a euphemism for loyalty to the Communist Party, by this time an organization virtually monolithic in its public face. Those hostile to the Party saw the committed ones as merely glove puppets for Party leaders. During the Cold War this was augmented with a conscious construction by anti-communist ideologues of committed Communists as “totalitarians”; a tactic intended to transfer features of German Nazis to the far left in the United States. Of course, the dwindling number of independent Marxists of the 1950s, many of whom were former Communists and Trotskyists still to the left of liberalism, mostly recognized the foolishness of this facile equation of opposite values; the “totalitarian” conflation was of very different economic systems and different ideologies, despite parallels in brutality. Cold War liberals, however, saw this amalgam as a way to abrogate to themselves the virtue of being objective, neutral, ideology-free, or skeptical, the classic self-ratifying formulas of those who offer their own partisanship as universal. They chose not to see their allegiance to the vaguely defined rhetoric of “freedom,” “democracy,” and “The West” as itself an ideology. What might actually be concluded from the Communist experience is not that ideological commitment necessarily brings disaster, but that shifting social realities can unexpectedly deform one’s change of alignment (the Marxist definition of commitment). In this case, Communist Party commitment usually began with many admirable ideals but was ultimately consolidated as a contingent aberration in which a certain illusions and erroneous beliefs had overwhelmed understanding. The lesson is not to forsake a change of alignment but that the person choosing commitment must continually re-ask the question: Commitment to what?

There is little to be discussed here for those who treat the entire history of Bolshevism (or even Marxism and revolutionary socialism) as a simple historical preface to Stalinism. The preponderance of literary radicals in the Depression era, however, had good reason to believe that to be a Communist was something very different: to share the élan of belonging to an international fighting force for social justice on every continent. After 1933, there was the Communist offensive against Nazism in Germany and the heroism of the Comintern-led brigades and battalions aimed at stopping Hitler and Mussolini from crushing the Spanish Republic. Although we now know that
the policies of the Communist International were not exactly what they claimed to be at the time, such sacrifice created a long-lasting belief that it was the Soviet Union—not our own country—that was the homeland of anti-fascism.

In sum, U.S. Communism established itself in practice—through its militant anti-racism and defense of working people and the unemployed—as a worthy social movement and moral cause. This aspect of its history should not be invalidated by the atrocities committed in its name, which were perpetrated by the brutal regimes of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and later by dictatorships such as that of Mao Zedong and Pol Pot. Compartmentalization is not the answer, either. It's healthier to confront the question of whether one can judge certain achievements separately from the political violence that made them possible. What does one do when one's causes, wonderful in theory, have been in practice inextricably linked to bloodshed and terror?

To be sure, the answers depend on the particular achievements and causes, and no one has crafted a response satisfactory to all situations. Communists, as I have indicated, were justified in defending their domestic accomplishments and some acts of international solidarity, but their record was untenable regarding Stalinism's overall achievement and interventions, even with the Red Army's extraordinary triumph over fascism, habitually used by apologists to exculpate the horrors of the Stalin regime. Not only did the Soviet Union fail in the end, which cannot be blamed exclusively on external pressures, but the harm carried out by its dictatorial and repressive system in the treatment of its own population and those of buffer states has discredited Stalinism among almost all of the Left. On the other hand, the self-righteous signaling out of Communists by their pro-capitalist antagonists in this regard is often a hypocritical and a duplicitous tactic; after all, a similar predicament of advancing through violence to others is shared by all U.S. citizens who benefited from the original genocidal invasion of the continent by Europeans, the massive enslavement of Africans that followed, and the subsequent wars often to prop up of numerous dictatorships. Both the self-proclaimed "socialist" East and "Free World" West were historically trapped in analogous, even if far from identical, contradictions of modernization. And both operated under the spell of believing the actions of their countrymen were part of a purposeful, objectively driven, development toward a redeeming end (a classless society, manifest destiny, the American Century), when the more likely explanation has less to do with an engine of socioeconomic or ideological inevitability than it does with the upshot of contingent decisions.

Recognizing that Communist commitment in the 1930s was neither innocent nor evil, not simply idealism duped nor a higher form of realism, means that it must be understood like other passionately felt ideologies—it sometimes worked in mysterious ways.

To Be a Communist

During middle of the 20th century, Communists provided leadership and the most committed cadres for domestic battles to unionize workers, defeat racism, discredit anti-Semitism, and foment a culture of humane values. It is reasonable to give the Party credit as the architect of critical moments and guiding organizations in successful struggles without depicting non-Communist participants as manipulated dupes. Literary radicals were naturally attracted to such efforts, a few joining the Party itself and/or becoming functionaries in the Party or organizations it led. Most participated more moderately than that in one way or another; they signed petitions, attended events, marched in demonstrations, and contributed to publications. Whatever the actual experience of life inside a Communist Party unit—which by all accounts varied considerably—the Communist-led social movement was hardly
just an army with political commissars barking orders; it had features of a network of friends and family and lovers who exerted moral pressure. Cultural workers mostly existed in a Greenwich Village ambience even if living in Chicago or San Francisco. Due to the puritanical public ethos of the Communist movement, the norm was to keep bohemian personal habits, including a substantial gay and lesbian subculture, under wraps. Forthright biographical research into the lives of Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964), Josephine Herbst (1892–1969), Agnes Smedley, and others now tell a more rounded story.

Literary radicals found many niches—new and aspiring writers joined the John Reed Club in the early 1930s; the more established ones became officers of the League of American Writers in the latter part of the decade. A few writers, such as Howard Fast (1914–2003) and Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), joined the Party as established figures; a few others, such as George Oppen (1908–1984) and Walter Lowenfels (1897–1976), gave up writing for decades of full-time Party activism but later returned to their most productive years. The more general pattern was of younger writers being educated through Party-sponsored or associated classes, often taught by established authors such as Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961), as well as by the campaigns and political theories of the movement; then, eventually they would break away when they obtained an independent status. Often, political disputes played a part in the process of disaffection by awakening them to an understanding that the Communist cultural world was more constricted than it had seemed when they were young. It might be argued that this movement from the Communist margin to mainstream was a central feature of several generations of African American writers. The first group included Richard Wright, Margaret Walker (1915–1998), Theodore Ward (1902–83), Ralph Ellison (1914–1994), Chester Himes (1909–1984), Langston Hughes (1902–1967), and Robert Hayden (1913–1980). Next came Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965), Douglas Turner Ward (b. 1930), Julian Mayfield (1928–1984), Rosa Guy (1922–2012), Paule Marshall (b. 1929), Audre Lorde (1934–1992), John Oliver Killens (1916–1987), and Lance Jeffers (1995–1985).

Which literary radicals should be treated as committed Communists, and what did this mean for literature? Even for the relatively few writers who publicly identified themselves as Communists, it’s impossible to know the genuine depth of one’s Marxist convictions. This is especially the case if one is referring to those who were mainly just writers, publishing occasionally in the *New Masses* and attending meetings of a Writer’s Unit that was something like a social club. It is dicey to just take someone’s word for it in terms of depicting the depth of a relationship. Memory is elusive, and the problem is not simply with those who would rather forget or turn the Communist episode into a joke or misunderstanding. Were not some of those raising the banner of “People’s Art” against the supposed bourgeois snobs and elitists actually engaged in their own assiduous self-promotion? Risking one’s life, as some writers did by joining committees that investigated atrocities against unions or volunteering to fight in Spain or World War II, might be more convincing evidence of profound allegiance. Even then, however, there may be no proof that the actual ideas of Marxism were the prime motivation—as opposed to anger at fascist barbarities or even peer pressure to prove one’s manhood. Is it necessary for a writer to have read a great deal of Marx, and to have understood the arguments, to be a committed Communist? Is it obligatory to have put one’s body on the line? Who is to judge the quantity and quality of Marxist understanding, or the extent of personal risk?

Writers are also self-contradictory; like anyone, they can harbor fully admirable principles and yet end up championing very nasty causes. The selfless altruism of the radical may have been present, but it could come in degrees; most were more inclined to adapt to the imperfect flux of life rather than to follow a monastic commitment that eclipsed all else. A Party loyalist might have had a stupendous record of duplicity in the service of a mistaken policy and complete sincerity in devotion to literary craft. A martyr to the anti-fascist cause might have been a
ruthless and opportunist womanizer, or a sadistic enforcer of the Comintern line. Pablo Picasso, Pablo Neruda, Diego Rivera, Aimé Césaire, Bertolt Brecht, Doris Lessing, and many others were world-class artists outside the United States who made earnest pledges to Communism. Their biographies tell us that they lived lives of multiple messy commitments and that their philosophical and political ideas were replete with contradictions foreign to Marxist doctrine let alone Stalinist orthodoxy.

This is among the reasons why scholars should not permit any narrow definition of “Communist” to stand at center stage of literary radicalism. For instance, Mike Gold is surely synonymous with the committed Communist in the 20th century, and he published prominent essays, fiction, drama, and poetry that are central to literary radicalism; yet he seemed to know little of Marxist theory or Leninist doctrine, and he rarely (perhaps never) functioned as a disciplined, organized Party member. He bashed apostates mercilessly even as he occasionally disagreed with Party policy himself, publicly stating his opposing views. His ties were emotional; what made him a Communist were the people with whom he worked, his agreement for the most part with Communist positions, and his public advocacy of the Soviet Union. When one gets up close to Gold, aspects of his psychology are darkly enigmatic, more like that of a religious person than a sophisticated dialectical materialist. It is easy to subsume people entirely under labels—Communist, fellow traveler, anti-communist—in the absence of ample biographical details and explicit definitions.

The situation is little different when discussing art. The critic with a limited definition of the “Communist writer” will look for, and confidently find, little more than ideology dramatized. Nevertheless, other models (ones based on Neruda, etc.) will allow the critic to discover additional preoccupations in the art: memory, dread, disorder, vanity, futility, a craving for significance, and the maddening lure of literary creation itself. With all the scholarship now available about the life and politics of Richard Wright, there are few who would read Native Son (1940) in the manner of Alfred Kazin in his 1942 classic On Native Grounds: “his own indignation and the sickness of the age combined to make him dependent on violence and shock, to astonish the reader by torrential scenes of cruelty, hunger, rape, murder, and flight and then enlighten him by crude Stalinist homilies … Wright had written ‘one of these books in which everything is undertaken with seriousness except the writing.’”

Nonetheless, one cannot take the tactic of jettisoning the specificity of the Communist loyalty of hundreds of cultural workers from the narratives of their lives, which also means neglecting Communism’s often energizing and enriching presence in their art. This silence, or curtailment to a vague “Left,” of Communist commitment is nearly as treacherous to scholarship as reducing the radical’s art to a mere vector of a particular ideology. John Steinbeck (1902–1968), Arthur Miller, Ann Petry, Lorraine Hansberry, Jo Sinclair, Willard Motley (1909–1965), and many other literary radicals have been subject to strong misreadings of their work due to their being divorced from the diverse Communist commitments of the early years of their literary careers.

What is required is to alter customary definitions of Communism to diminish its opprobrious connotations even as one wrestles with the real paradoxes at the core of Communist commitment. This more sophisticated and demanding approach to Communists as people with antinomies is likely to reveal much more about the art, but for it to happen the scholar must rewind to some forgotten frame of mind when Communism was not a box of confinement but a complicated and changing relationship. One must also include the way such commitment spilled out into adjacent areas, beyond the writers who were willing to take a public stand or whose ideas appear to be consistent with Party policy and official political theology in all respects. Instead of carrying out a desperate search to show all the ways in which a writer like the radical nonconformist John Steinbeck in the 1930s wasn’t “really” pro-Communist, it is time to drive a stake through the heart of that fable and realize that the quirky Steinbeck is pretty
much what a Communist fellow traveler actually looked like. Misinterpretations reiterated over decades are hard to shed; scholarship works best when grounded in the soil of critical inspection of thorough and contextualized primary sources.

Aftermaths

From 1946 on, piece-by-piece and then layer-by-layer, the great coalition known as the Popular Front disintegrated. In some ways the history of literary radicalism is still paying for the price of this collapse, which most adherents neither caused nor desired. Nevertheless, the Popular Front had an Achilles heel in the Soviet connection; this offered a strategic opportunity to the traditional Right to take the offensive, as well as for the mass desertion of leftists and liberals who now jumped ship from prior convictions with disconcerting alacrity. Defending the indefensible policies and practices of the Soviet Union had been hard enough, but in the Cold War, after years of waiting, reactionary forces had a chance to finally slake their thirst for political blood. This was enabled by the accusations of espionage—sensationalized then, but having some credibility—within the federal government as well as in association with atomic weapons research. A tiny percentage of radicalized individuals—some just naïve about the virtues of the Soviet Union as an anti-fascist power—opened the door to nightmare forces that rapidly tainted all varieties of radicalism and socialism as disloyal un-Americanism. The distinction between what was simply zealous advocacy on behalf of the Soviet regime and consciously conspiring to transmit information that the U.S. government had reason to be kept secret for national security, cannot always be made perfectly clear. Many members and supporters of Communism, internationally, were probably genuine in their belief that the Rosenbergs and others had been set up, simply because, in such a hysterical atmosphere, they could see themselves being framed for something they would never think of doing. Nonetheless, some Communists and their leaders did know the truth and were complicit, and ambitious anti-radical academics and journalists have successfully managed to revitalize espionage charges as a club against the Left through a cascade of books in the late 20th century.

The new radicalism that arose most clearly at the tail end of the McCarthy years posed a supreme challenge for theorizing the recent decades of literary radicalism, which has yet to be done in a convincing manner. When the door of social revolt swung wide in the 1930s, the Communist-led movement stood poised in the frame, but there was nothing comparable in the 1960s or after. The New Left and its successors could never agree on a structure and agenda for their collective activity, a teamwork that had been possible in the past due to the hard work and willingness to collaborate of the Old Left leadership. Is it now possible to see a symphony in a half-century where most see a cacophony? Perhaps so, if the appropriate chords can be established. After all, one of the most popular novels of 2013 was Jonathan Lenthem’s Dissident Gardens, which linked activists of the Occupy movement back to radical ancestors in the 1930s.

Nonetheless, it is only from the first fifty years of literary radicalism that a coherent architecture has been captured in a sequence of studies. Subsequently, the events during and following the 1960s upended the political geometry of the social movements that were a reference point. One could still recognize that many images, melodies, and much of the thinking of the New Left cultural radicalism and after rhymed with antecedents going back to the days of the Masses, but it was as if the fundamentals of an alternate universe were missing. The bewilderment over how to comprehend new developments probably began with the recognition that there emerged in the 1960s a full-blown “counterculture,” usually associated with the subculture of the hippies—a youth movement emerging from beatniks...
and hipsters that became immersed in psychedelic drugs and music. Its kinship to literary radicalism, with which it overlapped but was hardly synonymous, has not yet been parsed.

What kinds of questions need to be addressed to the history of literary radicalism in order to clarify its continuity with the present? Are they ones on the order of “how far have we come?” or “what have we lost?” Are scholars primarily divided over how to address the challenges of the past—through the prism of the failures of communism and socialism, or according to a hierarchy of aesthetic value? Or are we now in a quandary over what the challenges actually are? Perhaps we should also be asking ourselves why it is so important to even study this difficult story, which seems in retrospect to be a cyclical history of canceled promise. One answer is that it is useful to have a baseline, to be able to say: “This is what really existing literary radicalism turned out to look like.”

To be sure, literary radicalism needs a future. How long can a movement survive on cresting invocations of hope that turn out to be a catalogue of false dawns? Life in expectation of a coming Messiah, religious or secular, can result in disaster if the Messiah is tardy. What will it mean if we face another generation with stagnation, continuing decline in working-class consciousness, or defeat? Is it possible that the big challenges in the tradition of literary radicalism lie in our understanding the past; do we need to rethink things that have already occurred and acknowledge that we have failed to come to terms with them—or perhaps that we have even failed to see them? One specialist in contemporary cultural protest, T. V. Reed, recently asserted: “A continuing dialogue between the mid-twentieth century Cultural Front and the present is called for if critics and activists committed to social and economic justice are to understand the potential and limits of literary and cultural radicalism.”

If so, the challenges are certainly great, and many of us who have worked decades on the topic have fallen short in what we set out to accomplish; we have neither rewritten 20th-century literary history as a whole with the radical presence properly reconfigured, nor have we convincingly built a bridge from past to present with the requisite candor and deep research. Inasmuch as the memory loss of an earlier literary radicalism was institutional, and the social movement inspiring it literally destroyed, establishing the presence of radicalism in literary history is not just an act of cultural resuscitation; it is a matter of historical and imaginative reconstruction. Achieving a reasonable understanding of all this is still within our grasp. Not every approach that can be invented has been invented, and there are still archives to which to return and new ones to be discovered. This may seem a shocking perspective for a tradition whose self-image, arguably its very identity, is bound up in the expectation of constant progress partly rooted in the Enlightenment. Perhaps the future isn’t what it used to be.

Review of the Literature

Prior to the post–World War II era, there were discussions of literary radicalism in various journals but Left writers were customarily treated in scholarly books in terms other than any political group identity. This changed with the popularity of anticommunist indictments such as Richard Crossman’s anthology The God That Failed (1950) and the acceptance of harsh criticisms of fellow travelers such as in Lionel Trilling’s The Liberal Imagination (1950). As McCarthyism waned, academic studies such as Walter Rideout’s The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society (1956) and Daniel Aaron’s Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism (1961) treated radicals and Communists more humanely while standing by a conventional aesthetic that did little to stir excitement about their art. Memoirs, anthologies, and reprints flooded the 1960s, followed by biographies and more theoretically oriented studies in the 1980s and 1990s. These have
Further Reading


Notes:


(3.) Shulman’s The Power of Political Art is an example of a book that is dismissive of many of the real problems of political and personal commitment; revisionist works that acknowledge genuine complications in the radical tradition include Paula Rabinowitz, Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and William Maxwell, New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing Between the Wars (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

(4.) There are already partial efforts in this direction among books of recent decades, with mixed results. Although Cary Nelson is among those who habitually sidestep the specificities of radical political commitment in favor of broad generalities, the startling new approaches to literary form that mark his Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945 (1989) almost singlehandedly brought back to life the academic field of pro-Communist poets. The most ambitious single volume on the U.S. cultural Left is Michael Denning’s The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (London: Verso, 1997). This truly remarkably book, however, chooses to marginalize many questions that arise from the Communist presence by describing cultural radicalism from the 1930s to the 1950s as “social democratic” (p. xvii). The urban novels characteristic of the literary Left are dubbed “subaltern modernism” (p. 231). Understandably, a systematic consideration of questions of aesthetic evaluation is not on Denning’s already overworked agenda.

(5.) A few examples: Alan Filreis, Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry,
This is a limitation of even a humane and sympathetic study such as Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

This has been a central concern of my own recent work, such as *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).


For the most astute commentary on the *Seven Arts* editors, see Casey Nelson Blake’s *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

For the authoritative overview of this sequence and its roots in the postwar era, see Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The Left Since the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).


19. At the head of the pack is Harvey Klehr, originally a specialist in Communist history and more recently the author and co-author of numerous books on Soviet espionage in the United States.


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