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The Communist Party

Christopher Phelps

“The night the bank failed, Frank’s baby died.” Given its succinct association of capitalism with darkness, dolorousness, and death, this austere line from a short story published in the *New Masses* in 1931 might serve as a one-sentence distillation of the proletarian fiction championed by the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in its Depression heyday. The story in which it appeared, “Can You Make Out Their Voices,” tells of a rural region facing drought, economic severity, and starvation. The impoverished farmers take matters into their own hands by shouldering rifles and marching on the Red Cross to seize milk and bread for their children and community. The story may be classed within the preferred genres of left-wing literature in the Depression decade—social realism and proletarian literature—but it fit a more select category as well: dramatic representation of the American Communist experience.

At its height in the early thirties, “proletarian literature” was pervaded by ambiguity. Was it to be written by proletarians? To take proletarians as its subject? Or simply to inspire a revolutionary view of the world—and if the latter, could it be written by anyone

and could its protagonists be drawn from the middle class or even the rich?¹ “Can You Make Out Their Voices” somehow managed to satisfy the stricter side of all these criteria at once. It was authored by a young, impecunious, déclassé writer; it placed hardscrabble dirt farmers at the center of its drama; and it exemplified the potential for an avowedly Communist fiction focused upon the revolutionary organizer as its subject. Here was a Bolshevism of the backcountry, Lenin’s *What is to Be Done?* set in a fictive American landscape. The story’s protagonist, a militant Communist, is thought “queer” by his community because of his politics, but that very iconoclasm enables him to fan the flames of discontent and inspire mass action. Although the story is bleak, foreboding, and ominous, it conveys a desperate heroism, implying that class uprisings will not arise spontaneously from hard times or injustice—that they require a tiny dedicated core, stoked with a proper analysis of social forces, ready with appropriate strategies and tactics, willing to transgress law and convention, and courageous enough to lead the way as a revolutionary vanguard.

In the year “Can You Make Out Their Voices” was published, 1931, its thirty-year-old author published three more stories—a total of four—in the *New Masses*. One, set in China, depicts revolutionaries who skirmish with soldiers and face capture and death, concluding, “The march to victory is up the sharp side of mountains.” The October *New Masses* cover story was “Our Comrade Munn,” a portrayal of a Communist in a New England factory town who challenges a complacent Party branch leadership before he is shot and killed by police on a picket line. “Death of the Communists” portrays men before a prison firing squad who go to their deaths singing “The Internationale.” Each tale, then, puts Communist activity at the crux. Each is told omnisciently, suggesting how Communists might be viewed by others,

¹ These questions are posed in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party* (1957; New York: Da Capo, 1974): 302-303; and Walter B. Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965): 166-170.

not in a first-person mode getting at the interiority of Communist experience. Most of the stories end in ruination, with historical necessity supplying ultimate justification for revolutionary commitment, and with death as motif. The stories, in short, are philosophical existentialism *avant la lettre*, with Communist commitment cast as a desperate way of imbuing life with purpose. Their ambience, a Spenglerian Stalinism, borders on despondence.²

Yet the first of the stories, especially, resonated in its time and place. International Publishers, the Party imprint, released it as a pamphlet under the modified title *Can You Hear Their Voices?* A Soviet literary critic in *International Literature* praised the author as one of the *New Masses*' "best contributors" and said the story "for the first time in American literature gives a revolutionary exposition of the problem of the agricultural crisis and correctly raises the question of the leading role of the Communist Party in the revolutionary farmers' movement."³ The story was made into a play by Hallie Flanagan of the Vassar Experimental Theatre and subsequently staged around the nation, a breakthrough that set Flanagan on course to direct the Federal Theatre Project under the New Deal. *The New Masses* bestowed recognition on the story's author by drafting him onto its editorial board and, in 1932, elevating him to managing editor. In the following year, Lincoln Steffens—the muckraking journalist whose autobiography, published in 1931, sparked interest in the Soviet Union among intellectuals—wrote to the author, saying, "My hat came off while I was reading today a story of yours. How you can write! ...Whenever I

² These four stories of 1931 were "Can You Make Out Their Voices," *New Masses*, vol. 6, no. 10 (March 1931): 7-16; "You Have Seen the Heads," *New Masses*, vol. 6, no. 11 (April 1931): 14-16; "Our Comrade Munn," *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 5 (October 1931): 13-17; and "Death of the Communists," *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 7 (December 1931): 10-12.

³ A. Elistratova, "New Masses," *International Literature*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1932): 110. One American Communist who traveled to Moscow found that Elistratova, a regular and stern Soviet judge of American literary production, was "a twenty-year-old apple-cheeked girl who knew English imperfectly and absolutely nothing about the United States," according to Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961): 437.

hear people talking about ‘proletarian art and literature,’ I’m going to ask them to shut their mouths and look at you.”⁴

By the time Steffens wrote that, however, the intended recipient had vanished from view. He was living under assumed names, having become a secret operative for Soviet intelligence in the United States. It was a furtive, underground form of Communist commitment, one that his fiction—focused on the agitator—did not anticipate. Despite a note in the *New Masses* saying he was “at work on a novel” and had “just completed a one-act play on a miners’ strike,” the author never again published any creative fiction.⁵ The demands of his new life, followed some six years later by his rupture with Communism out of disillusionment over the Moscow Trials, brought an end to his left-wing literary output. His failure to ever publish a novel may explain why his four *New Masses* stories are mentioned only in passing, if at all, in histories of proletarian literature and American Communist fiction, but another reason lies in his name: Whittaker Chambers.

Chambers would become famous when, as an editor at *Time* magazine, he testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1948 at the dawn of the Cold War, accusing high-ranking State Department official Alger Hiss of having passed classified government information to him in the thirties. In *Witness* (1952), his bestselling autobiography, he would marshal the same mood he once brought to the *New Masses*—dark, portentous, with a tragic sense of history—against Communism. Hiss went to prison, convicted for perjury for denying Chambers’s charges under oath, but in years to come a number of commentators would portray that verdict and Chambers’s *National Review* conservatism as inseparable from McCarthyism’s unjust crescendo. Their doubts about Chambers’s veracity seemed vindicated as Richard M. Nixon, the Republican HUAC member

⁴ *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens, Vol. II: 1920-1936* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938): 961.

⁵ *New Masses*, vol. 7, no. 5 (October 1931): 31.

who first gained prominence by championing Chambers, became President, prolonged the Vietnam War, and then resigned from office after the Watergate cover-up, suggesting he might have been mendacious in the Hiss-Chambers affair, too. However, compelling evidence—especially the Venona archival releases referring to a Soviet source high in the State Department code-named “ALES”—now indicates that Chambers testified far more accurately than Hiss.⁶

Chambers’s forgotten left-wing literary career, followed by his pathway from Soviet agent to conservative renegade, is emblematic of the dual quality of the American Communist cultural experience. On the one hand those published in the *New Masses*, whether Party members or close to the Party (a group far larger in number), generated a body of work that amalgamated radical political consciousness with creative literature, fostering a culture of labor and class resistance combined with opposition to empire, racial oppression, and war. Varied in quality, sometimes stultifying, it was also at times quite original and finely tuned in its craft and art. Although American, these works of fiction, poetry, and reportage may not have come into being at all if not for the inspiration provided by the Russian Revolution and the promise it seemed to hold of a society better than capitalism, as well as the resources and cultural institutions the Communist movement supplied, such as the *New Masses*. Chambers’s life equally demonstrates, however, that the Communist movement, by subordinating the fortunes of American radicalism to the leadership of a foreign state, left itself vulnerable to the twists and turns, at times jolting, of a political line set abroad. As the reality of the Soviet party-state headed by Joseph Stalin

⁶ This turning of consensus began with Allen Weinstein, *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (New York: Knopf, 1978). See also National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency, *Venona: Soviet Espionage and the American Response, 1939-1957* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996).

became plain, the trickle of defections became a flood. In Chambers, this double-sidedness is embodied within one life.

Communism, this is to say, *structured* intellectual commitment and literary production. It did so by means of internalized discipline, institutional control, resource deployment, and a resolutely applied political line. Consequently, the Party structured a swathe of intellectual life well beyond its membership. It accomplished that both by formal front groups and the influence of members in such influential professions as publishing, the arts, music, theatre, and journalism. Chambers's *New Masses* fictional representations were imbued with the value and meaning of this structuring—his heroes were Communist Party militants—and he manifested such reverence for it in his own life that he was willing to set aside his artistic ambition and literary work to take up an underground existence.

Recent literary histories have tended to portray Communist writers and intellectuals in largely favorable terms as American radicals first and foremost, admirable for their social and political commitments. Some of these studies adopt a biographical method, whether in focusing on individual lives or weaving composite tapestries. Others are framed by themes or ideas such as the “laboring” of culture. Both approaches, biographical and thematic, abound with insights and archival findings that have expanded and enriched our understanding of the Communist literary experience of the 1930s generation.⁷ Out of desire to locate a usable past and exonerate past radicalisms, however, some contemporary scholars have obscured or downplayed the nature of the Communist Party's organizational discipline and congruence with Stalin's Soviet Union—or even romanticized, celebrated, or

⁷ For landmark works consider Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London: Verso, 1997), and the trilogy by Alan M. Wald: *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

justified that dependency in some manner.⁸ While McCarthyist caricatures of American Communists as regimented or robotic are properly discredited, a corrective or supplementation is in order that gives greater consideration to the core *structuring* of Communist life. The CPUSA was significant not only for the doctrines and ideas it promoted, such as Marxist philosophy, but for structuring the everyday experience of those in and near it. Communists and their fellow-traveling allies adhered willingly to a politics and organizational flowchart that tied them to Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union, with disastrous moral and political consequences.

The political line functioned less often as a set of explicit directives (though sometimes that was its exact nature) than as a tether granting latitude within a prescribed circumference, with room for variance in local application. Liberal critics of Communism, particularly during the Cold War, often compared Communism to a religion with its own dogmas, scriptures, rituals, and saints. The analogy is plausible but it is better to comprehend the CPUSA as an outpost in a bureaucratic mode of production. In the Soviet Union, the promised workers' control of the early revolutionary years had given way to single-party administrative rule in replacement of private property. That state provided a foundation for the American Communist Party, a base upon which forms of culture arose. This structuring of political and intellectual life explains why Communist policy, ideology, and even aesthetic criteria could shift quite dramatically, for all were linked to the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

How structure illuminates the individual American Communists' lived experience may be seen, up close, in one forgotten New York writer's life, that of Hank Fuller. Shortly after the New Year in 1934, Fuller wrote to his girlfriend Muriel Rukeyser, whose *Theory of*

⁸ A prolific and emphatic historian of this school is Gerald Horne; softer forms exist in others, including some with great talent and influence, such as Robin D. G. Kelley.

Flight, published the following year, would help make her a major American poet, to inform her that “a new branch, Ernst Torgler, has been formed on the lower East Side.” The branch’s name, he felt no need to say, signified anti-fascist ardor by alluding to the name of the leader of the German Communist Party’s Reichstag delegation prior to the Nazi seizure of power. “It now has about 25 members, the vast majority unemployed. They are such fine people. We do business in three languages. ...I am tactless, tend to be dictatorial at times, other times giving in too easily. There is friction, most of it healthy and work goes on.” In the prior year, Fuller and Rukeyser had journeyed to Alabama, where nine young African-American men were on trial for rape of two white women at Scottsboro in what Communists believed a frame-up. He and she shared a commitment to writing, although Fuller’s orientation was more down-market. Once he had written for the *New Republic* and a leading African-American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*; now his output was for pulps. “The sex story sold without difficulty at the place which was interested in things miscegenated,” one of his letters reported. “The new editor likes me,” he wrote in another. “I left some rank pornography and hope the hell they pay a little something. ...I once wrote a lot of things for him which sold to the sidewalk sex-starved and all the hunters of perverts.”⁹

Fuller needed the money. Having lived in New York six years since migrating from Florida, he was making only \$15 a week at a Civil Works Administration job as a clerk, plus his haphazard pay as a Communist organizer. “The Section owes me about \$7 to \$10. It may pay sometime.” Fuller’s political organizing did not always go smoothly. “Things, even the Party line,” he wrote, “do not travel directly from point of inception to point of

⁹ Hank Fuller to Muriel Rukeyser, 3 January 1934 and n.d. (Muriel Rukeyser Papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

culmination.” The police broke up demonstrations at Union Square. Fear abounded, with one comrade believing “there will be a massacre and the Party will be driven underground.” Still, the pulse of action was quickening. By August, Fuller was pleased to relate that the *Daily Worker* would go into three editions at the beginning of October: “There will be a morning and an evening one here in the city also an enlarged national.”¹⁰

As a Party organizer, Fuller’s life was highly structured every day of the week. “During the week it was class on Monday and later a political meeting on a street corner,” he wrote to Rukeyser. “Then Tuesday it was a long street corner meeting at which I spoke over an hour. Wednesday I again spoke on the Lower East Side and Thursday I spoke in the Square... Tonight it is a Slovak branch meeting and god knows I speak no Russian, Ukranian, or whatever it may be that the members of the Slovak branch speak. Sunday, as yet, is not scheduled for activity beyond an executive meeting at 1. In between I have worked two days for the city, run around for the District, and chased halls, individuals, etc.” Even within a single day, the Party supplied structure. “Am tired out and wanting you so much tonight,” he wrote one evening. “First Buro, then Section Committee and it was nearly 4PM. Then at the District in search of a definition, 5:45. Ate. Downtown to a boys’ club, nearly all Jewish and the kids are afraid to protest against Hitler terror. The bosses’ America. ‘Only the Communists kick and they get nowhere.’ Then two churches, Negro, and so much God they have no time for lynchings. Then a strike, food workers and there was an arrest, and now home. Made contact with one nice Negro family. Found one preacher a rat and no kidding. Have made one friend among the boys and have arranged to speak at a boys’ club and at

¹⁰ Hank Fuller to Muriel Rukeyser, 3 January, 7 February, and 28 August 1934, 28 August n.y. (Rukeyser Papers).

the strike tomorrow night. In between times, so lonesome. A Jewish comrade, member CP, USSR, moves in here tomorrow. He is older.”¹¹

Meetings, demonstrations, speeches, fund-raising, leaflet-writing: every day and night in the life of the dedicated Communist in the 1930s was shaped by structure. Orrick Johns, who joined in San Francisco and went on to edit the *New Masses* in New York, said that during his four years in the CPUSA “I no longer had a personal life, in the sense of being my own master. I was the servant of a cause, and a semi-legal cause, under the control of my superiors at all times.” Quotidian life in the Party was “dry, dull, and repetitious,” he wrote, a phrase echoed in Granville Hicks’s description of Party life as “dull as dishwater,” akin to a volunteer fire association. A workhorse culture meant that Communists were often credited for being the ones in unions and other social movements who, in the words of Elizabeth Hawes, “do all the work, distribute the leaflets, sweep the hall, make the sandwiches”—“the only ones who always turn up and can be depended upon.”¹²

By this structuring of activity, the Party superseded the subjective intentions of those who comprised it. Contrary to psychoanalytic claims that all Communists were disturbed, individual Communists were of every personality type. “Of the admirable persons I have known in my life, a considerable proportion belonged—and some still belong—to the Communist Party,” wrote Hicks after breaking with it. “There is more self-seeking in the average church, more hypocrisy on the average college faculty, more opportunism in the average charitable society than there is in the Communist Party.”¹³ According to Hawes,

¹¹ Hank Fuller to Muriel Rukeyser, “Saturday” [n.d., n.y.] and 12:40A.M. [n.d., n.y.] (Rukeyser Papers).

¹² Orrick Johns, *Time of Our Lives* (New York: Stackpole Sons, 1937): 322, 351; Granville Hicks, *Where We Came Out* (New York: Viking, 1954): 43; Elizabeth Hawes, *Hurry Up Please It’s Time* (n. p.: The Cornwall Press, 1946): 84.

¹³ Granville Hicks, “Communism and the American Intellectuals,” in *Whose Revolution? A Study of the Future Course of Liberalism in the United States*, ed. Irving DeWitt Talmadge (New York: Howell, Soskin, 1941): 99, 102.

there were two kinds of Party members. One was the Catechismic Communist who “knew everything out of books and if life did not accord with the book, then life was wrong.” This sort “couldn’t live unless under strict orders” and “believed themselves very disciplined but in reality...were either afraid to use their heads or couldn’t.” The other was the Common Comrade or “average CP member one met in union work,” who had an “unusual staunchness” derived from a “deep belief in socialism” that “made him an unusually hard worker along whatever line he chose to go.” Impressively honest to an extent, Hawes’s portrait of a Communist picking up “whatever line he chose” was fanciful, for as she well knew, Party commitment mitigated against pure individualism.¹⁴

Just as the prism of structure clarifies the nature of individual Communist experience and helps explain how the Party melded varied personalities into a common purpose, structure illuminates the broader left-wing political and cultural landscape of the 1930s. Across the decade, the CPUSA sponsored key cultural institutions and initiatives corresponding to strategic phases set by the Communist International. With the ultra-left “revolutionary” phase between 1928 and 1933 came a “proletarian” emphasis on art as a weapon in the class struggle. After the shock of the 1933 Nazi triumph came a less determinate phase that in 1935 crystallized as the People’s Front, with opposition to fascism elevated to the foreground. Lastly came a brief ultra-leftism brought on by the Nazi-Stalin “non-aggression” pact that ended with the 1941 Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Political-diplomatic history, given its focus on espionage, has come to consensus about Soviet oversight of the American Communist apparatus. A good deal of social-historical and literary

¹⁴ Hawes positioned herself merely as a “non-Red-Baiter” despite a long history of writing for the *Daily Worker*. The book appeared in the postwar period when the Party was expunging “Browderism” and taking a Stalinist “revolutionary” turn under William Z. Foster. In elevating the Commoner over the Catechismic, Hawes faulted the latter for hewing to the moderate wartime line of Earl Browder. She therefore managed to both signify loyalty to the Party’s new “proletarian” line by celebrating the simple working-class members and simultaneously object to Party dogmatism. Hawes, *Hurry Up Please it’s Time*, 84-85.

scholarship on American Communism, however, continues to emphasize Party members' organizing among the unemployed and labor, opposition to racism, resistance to fascism, and contributions to arts and letters while downplaying the hierarchical nature of Party structure, dependency on Soviet direction, and reversals of line. Earlier treatments in the secondary literature minced no words over these realities and their consequences. "Stalin converted the literary practitioners into a public information army of the Soviet state," wrote Daniel Aaron in *Writers on the Left* (1961)—still the best single-volume history of the American literary left between the wars, one careful to resist crudities regarding Communist writers and their work.¹⁵

In the 1930s, the CPUSA openly boasted that its "democratic centralism" required members' structural subordination to a Central Committee and loyalty to the Communist International and Soviet Union.¹⁶ Granville Hicks, a Harvard instructor who was among the most prominent of Communist literary intellectuals, came to regret that he "refused to see that the Communist Party of the United States was completely subservient to the Soviet Union," but he may not have been so unaware since at the American Writers Congress in 1937 he declared himself "confident that sooner or later Communism will be established throughout the world, and that its establishment will begin—that, indeed, the founding of the Soviet Union has already begun—a new era in human history."¹⁷ Devotion to the Soviet Union was the sine qua non of Communist politics. It is precisely what the Communists' critics on the radical left most objected to, as when Dwight Macdonald faulted the American Writers Congress for requiring "an a priori agreement on Stalinist policies," or when Socialist

¹⁵ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 145.

¹⁶ See, for example, J. Peters, *The Communist Party: A Manual on Organization* (New York: Workers Library, 1935) and M. J. Olgin, *Why Communism?* (New York: Workers Library, 1935).

¹⁷ Hicks, *Where We Came Out*, 7; Hicks, "The Writer Faces the Future," in *The Writer in a Changing World*, ed. Henry Hart (n.p.: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937): 182.

leader Norman Thomas, in a 1935 Madison Square Garden debate with Earl Browder, said, "I trust the democracy of a party more than I trust a rule from on top, a centralization so great that orders are handed down from Moscow...so that some of you have been made rather dizzy changing your minds to keep up with the correct line."¹⁸

On one level, of course, the Soviet Union functioned purely as inspiration. The October Revolution, in the words of Joshua Kunitz, was a "cultural revolution."¹⁹ Its example gave American writers and artists permission to explore themes of class struggle between exploiters and exploited. Strikes abounded in the plays of Clifford Odets, the fiction of Michael Gold and Agnes Smedley, and the art of William Gropper and Hugo Gellert, among others. Out of the mines, mills, logging camps, and factories, it was hoped, a new drama, art, poetry, and literature would originate. Gold, an advocate of American emulation of Soviet "Prolet-Kult," wrote, "When there is singing and music rising in every American street, when in every American factory there is a drama-group of workers, when mechanics paint in their leisure, and farmers write sonnets, the greater art will grow and only then."²⁰ This "proletarian realism" had its left-wing critics from the beginning, such as Edmund Wilson, who argued that proletarian literature made no more sense as a concept than proletarian chemistry, or the Harlem writer Claude McKay, who, worrying over the likely diminution of literary standards, mocked Gold for wanting to print "doggerel from lumberjacks and stevedores and true revelations from chambermaids."²¹

Nevertheless, the worker-writer impulse allowed the Party to sponsor the John Reed Clubs of the early thirties, which promoted raw, untutored writers in the Communist orbit.

¹⁸ Dwight Macdonald, "The American Writers' Congress," *The Nation*, June 19, 1937, 714; *Debate: Which Road for American Workers, Socialist or Communist? Norman Thomas vs. Earl Browder* (New York: Socialist Call, 1936): 8.

¹⁹ Joshua Kunitz, "Introduction," *Azure Cities* (New York: International, 1929): 10.

²⁰ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 89.

²¹ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 93.

Meanwhile, the economic crisis was radicalizing new swathes of traditional intellectuals. Soviet Russia, with its Five-Year Plan and claim of full employment, provided a stark contrast with the wasteful, anarchic, capitalist economies. “I have been over into the future, and it works,” declared Lincoln Steffens upon returning from Moscow.²² Theodore Dreiser, author of *Sister Carrie* (1900), took a trip to Kentucky to report on the bitter Harlan County coal mining strike and returned to say, “My solution for the difficulties of the world, and particularly those in America, is Communism.”²³ By 1932, fifty-three writers and intellectuals, from John Dos Passos to Langston Hughes, were prepared to endorse the Communist ticket, declaring in *Culture and the Crisis*, “As responsible intellectual workers we have aligned ourselves with the frankly revolutionary Communist Party, the party of the workers.”²⁴

That rhetorical fusion of party and class was telling, for it made “proletarian” synonymous with Communist. Rather than being open to all radical working-class currents, however, the Communist Party was monolithic, having expelled two key factions at Moscow’s insistence.²⁵ Despite having only 10-15,000 members, the Party projected itself as the vanguard of millions. “The leader of the revolution in all its stages is the Communist Party,” presidential candidate William Z. Foster wrote in *Toward Soviet America* (1932), promising a “proletarian dictatorship” of single-party rule through suppression of all political rivals. “Under the dictatorship all the capitalist parties—Republican, Democratic,

²² Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens* (1974; New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013): 250.

²³ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 178.

²⁴ League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, *Culture and the Crisis* (New York: Workers Library, 1932): 3.

²⁵ The former leadership bloc of the Party, headed by Jay Lovestone, was disorged in 1929, shortly after the Trotskyists in 1928. These expulsions were crucial in sealing the American Communist leadership’s strict fidelity to Soviet direction thereafter.

Progressive, Socialist, etc.—will be liquidated, the Communist Party functioning alone as the Party of the toiling masses.”²⁶

The quest for a proletarian art superior to bourgeois culture was embedded within the mindset of the Third Period (1928-1933), a phase of Comintern policy in which vitriol was directed against all rivals on the left as “social-fascists.” This policy led to physical attacks on Socialists, most famously at Madison Square Garden in 1934. Such attitudes, and the regime originating them, had begun to produce revulsion. In his “Ballad of an Intellectual” (1932), the poet E. E. Cummings, whose trip to the Soviet Union persuaded him that Communism was authoritarian, wrote:

*Now all you morons of sundry classes
(who read the Times and who buy the Masses)
...I mightn't think (and you mightn't too)
that a Five Year Plan's worth a Gay Pay Oo
and both of us might irretrievably pause
ere believing that Stalin is Santa Clause.*²⁷

Lewis Mumford, similarly, wrote to Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley in 1932 that he saw no value in “being tied up even temporarily with a party whose official ideology—dialectical materialism—seems to me as unsound as it is cocky and self-confident, and whose political tactics are so transparently opportunist.”²⁸

Viewed from another angle, however, the Communists could seem impressively bold compared to the weak tea of social democracy. The perception that Communists “really meant it” carried through after 1933 as the menace of Hitler began to propel artists, teachers, writers, journalists, and professionals leftward. In the context of the New Deal, with a revived labor movement in the offing, there was immense appeal in the People’s

²⁶ William Z. Foster, *Toward Soviet America* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1932): 275.

²⁷ The GPU (pronounced “Gay Pay Oo”) was the Soviet secret police, forerunner of the KGB. E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*, ed. George James Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991): 279.

²⁸ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 258.

Front against fascism announced by the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in August 1935. “Every anti-fascist is needed in this united front,” Gold pronounced. “There must be no base factional quarrels.”²⁹ With right-wing authoritarianism and militarism ascendant in Italy, Germany, and Japan, even the flagship American liberal periodicals, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, supported a “democratic front” that included the Soviet Union. As Party membership soared to some 80,000 members, the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 seemed the frontline battle in halting the advance of fascism. Some Americans, including Hank Fuller, journeyed there to fight in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, while far more attended fund-raising cocktail parties for Loyalist Spain, from Hollywood to Park Avenue. More from upper-class origins than ever before were attracted to what one called “the fashionable pose of being a Communist.”³⁰

In this context the worker was displaced by “the people” in the left-wing literary imagination. The John Reed Clubs, with their untrained proletarian writers, were shunted aside for new Popular Front efforts drawing on illustrious literary names such as those of Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and Dorothy Parker. This disbanding of the John Reed Clubs—opposed by Richard Wright, for one, who became a writer through them—was a decision made by Earl Browder on the Ninth Floor of Party headquarters on East Thirteenth Street in New York City, and passed down by Alexander Trachtenberg, informally considered the Party’s “cultural commissar.”³¹ The result was the American Writers Congress, which gave birth to the League of American Writers. In *The Nation*, Kenneth Burke declared that “this congress was unquestionably made possible only by the vitality and organizational

²⁹ Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 156.

³⁰ Burton Rascoe, *We Were Interrupted* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1947): 163.

³¹ Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (1944; New York: Harper & Row, 1977): 98; Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, 282; Rideout, *Radical Novel*, 148.

ability of the Communist Party.”³² In the exuberance of the moment, American Communists were given to writing articles with titles such as “USSR—Land of Real Democracy,” but democracy, as all of this indicates, was never the organizing principle of the Communist movement.³³ Interventions by midlevel Party functionaries, particularly if heavy-handed, could rankle writers and intellectuals. Budd Schulberg, the Hollywood screenwriter and author of the satirical novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), broke with the Party after his brush with one such authority, V. J. Jerome: “I came away with the conviction that the Communists I had known before, with two possible exceptions, were innocent amateurs, and that I had seen at last the true face of the Party, the face of the political commissar, rigid, narrow, dictatorial, defending each devious twist and turn of the Party Line as if it were eternal truth.”³⁴

The anti-fascism of the Popular Front was itself structured. Despite ritual appeals to unity, it would admit no radical, no matter how resolutely opposed to fascism, who was fundamentally critical of Stalin’s Soviet Union—an exclusion that transpired at the very moment when Stalin’s Great Purges were extinguishing millions of lives. When Waldo Frank, first chair of the League of American Writers, came to doubt the Moscow Trials, he was immediately removed from his honorary position in 1937. Browder, speaking to the American Writers Congress, spoke of “a broad unity of all democratic and progressive forces against the rising menace of fascist barbarism”—and then, in the same breath, condemned anarchists and Trotskyists in Spain as “agents of the fascists.”³⁵ From exile in Mexico, Leon Trotsky denounced the Soviet “Thermidor,” arguing that Popular Front conciliation of

³² Kenneth Burke, “The Writers’ Congress,” *The Nation*, May 15, 1935, 571.

³³ *Educational Vanguard* (23 July 1936), published by the Teachers College and Columbia Units of the Communist Party.

³⁴ Budd Schulberg, “Collision with the Party Line,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, August 30, 1952: 32.

³⁵ Earl Browder, “The Writer and Politics,” in *The Writer in a Changing World*, 50, 52.

bourgeois liberalism and the purges were conjoint manifestations of the Stalinist bureaucracy's conservative retreat from proletarian revolution. A number of talented intellectuals—including James T. Farrell, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, V. F. Calverton, Sidney Hook, C. L. R. James, and the editors of *Partisan Review*, originally an organ of the John Reed Clubs of New York—criticized the Communist Party from the left.³⁶ The Communist press branded them all “Trotskyite,” a term of abuse meant to place them beyond the pale and inhibit others from considering their perspectives seriously.

A coda to the decade came with the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939. It and the ensuing invasion of Poland appalled Popular Front liberals who had imagined the Soviet Union to be an implacable bulwark against fascism and war. The Party's reputation would never recover as the consequences of structure became painfully apparent. “Even if our efforts had done no harm,” wrote Hicks, remembering various Popular Front initiatives, “they did almost no good, for the Party liquidated the whole anti-fascist front, which we had worked so hard to create.”³⁷ Although two years later the United States would enter a Grand Alliance with the Soviet Union, never again did many intellectuals trust the CPUSA. Fidelity to Stalin's foreign policy left Communists vulnerable in the McCarthy era, by which time Common Comrades were difficult to discern from Catechismics. “When an individual has accepted three or four changes of line, reversing his stated opinions each time,” wrote Hicks, “he does not have much left with which he can resist.”³⁸ Though some Communists may still have had the best of intentions, their minds were, in a word, structured.

³⁶ The anti-Stalinist radical left is detailed in Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987); and Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁷ Hicks, *Where We Came Out*, 44.

³⁸ Hicks, *Where We Came Out*, 47.