

NEW MASSES

VOLUME 4

JANUARY, 1929

NUMBER 8

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Subscribers are notified that no change of address can be effected in less than a month. The NEW MASSES is a co-operative venture. It does not pay for contributions.

Subscription \$1.50 a year in U. S. and Colonies, Canada and Mexico. Foreign \$2.00. Single Copy, 15 cents.

GO LEFT, YOUNG WRITERS!

By MICHAEL GOLD

Literature is one of the products of a civilization like steel or textiles. It is not a child of eternity, but of time. It is always the mirror of its age. It is not any more mystic in its origin than a ham sandwich.

It is easy to understand the lacquer of cynicism, smartness and Ritz sophistication with which popular American writing is now coated. This is a product of "our" sudden prosperity, the gesture of our immense group of *nouveau riches*.

The epic melancholy of Dreiser, the romantic democracy of Carl Sandburg, the social experimentation of Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, Edgar Lee Masters and other men of the earlier decades, is as dead as the Indian's Manitou.

We are living in another day. It is dominated by a hard, successful, ignorant jazzy bourgeois of about thirty-five, and his leech-like young wife.

Just as European tours, night clubs, Florida beaches and stream line cars have been invented for this class, just so literature is being produced for them. They have begun to have time, and now read books occasionally to fill in the idle moments between cocktail parties.

They need novels that will take the place of the old fashioned etiquette books to teach them how to spend their money smartly. Ernest Hemingway is one of the caterers to this demand.

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The liberals have become disheartened and demoralized under the strain of American prosperity. Are there any liberals left in America? I doubt it. The "Nation" was the last organ of the liberals in this country. It has been swinging right in the last few years. When it surrendered itself body and soul to Tammany Hall in the last campaign, I think it performed a logical suicide.

Its editorials now read like the New York World. Its book reviews and dramatic criticisms are no different in viewpoint from those in the New York Times or Tribune. In fact the same group of writers fill the columns of both liberal and conservative press, and no one can detect the difference.

There isn't any difference.

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There isn't a centrist liberal party in our politics any more, or in our literature. There is an immense overwhelming, right wing which accepts the American religion of "prosperity." The conservatives accept it joyfully, the liberals "soulfully." But both accept it.

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There is also a left wing, led in politics by the Communists, and in literature by the New Masses. Will someone inform us if

there is something vital between these two extremes of right and left?

This is in some ways a depressing situation. Can there be a battle between such unequal forces? Will it not rather be a massacre or a lion carelessly crushing the rabbit that has crossed his path?

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No. The great mass of America is not "prosperous" and it is not being represented in the current politics or literature. There are at least 40 million people who are the real America.

They are Negroes, immigrants, poor farmers and city proletarians and they live in the same holes they did ten years ago. Upon their shoulders the whole gaudy show-palace rests. When they stir it will and must fall.

It was the same in Rome, in France, in Russia; it is the same here.

Let us never be dazzled by appearances. The American orgy has been pitched on the crater of the historic social volcano.

This volcano is as certain to erupt eventually as is Mount Etna.

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By default, the liberals have presented us writers and revolutionists of the left wing with a monopoly on the basic American mass. We have a wonderful virgin field to explore; titanic opportunities for creative work.

Let us be large, heroic and self-confident at our historic task.

* * * * *

The best and newest thing a young writer can now do in America, if he has the vigor and the guts, is to go leftward. If he gets tangled up in the other thing he will make some money, maybe, but he will lose everything else. Neither the Saturday Evening Post or the Nation can any longer nourish the free heroic soul. Try it and see.

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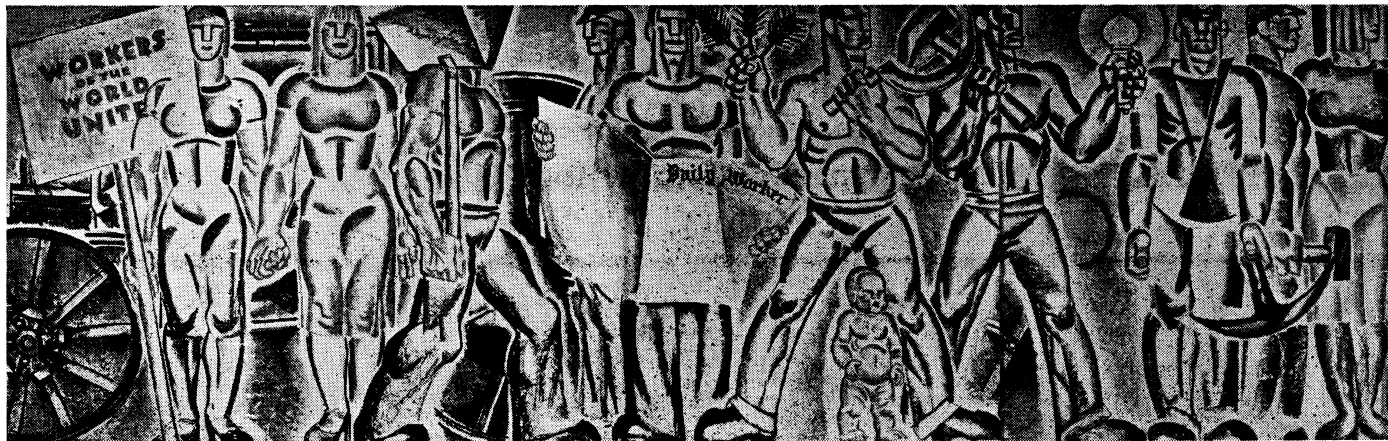
When I say "go leftward," I don't mean the temperamental bohemian left, the stale old Paris posing, the professional poetizing etc. No, the real thing; a knowledge of working class life in America gained from first hand contacts, and a hard precise philosophy of 1929 based on economics, not verbalisms.

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The old Masses was a more brilliant but a more upper class affair. The New Masses is working in a different field. It goes after a kind of flesh and blood reality, however crude, instead of the smooth perfect thing that is found in books.

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The America of the Working class is practically undiscovered.



From a Labor Mural By Hugo Gellert

Hugo Gellert, one of the New Masses artists, has been realizing a dream he has had for years. Recently, the Proletcos, a co-operative society of left-wing workers, opened an immense new cafeteria at 28 Union Square, New York. Gellert was given the contract for designing and decorating the interior.

He has created a cafeteria that is probably the finest example of modern art in America. Several art magazines have written it up, and the art critic of the ritzy New Yorker reviewed it with more enthusiasm than he has given to the most fashionable exhibitions.

The cafeteria does a rushing business, and caters to about 2,000 people a day. It is not only a restaurant, but a worker's club. And Hugo Gellert, one of the leading revolutionary artists of America, has given this cafeteria the bold modern beauty of the worker's movement. Everything is in harmony with a central design—lamps, tables, floors, ceilings. On the walls Gellert has painted a massive fresco of American labor—Negro workers, women workers, miners, the inside of a steel mill, Sacco and Vanzetti, John Reed, Lenin, Ruthenberg and other symbolic and real figures—ten feet tall.

This cafeteria is worth a visit. It is the first large demonstration in this country of that union of art and labor which is the keynote of Soviet Russia.

It is like a lost continent. Bits of it come above the surface in our literature occasionally and everyone is amazed. But there is no need yet of going to Africa or the Orient for strange new pioneering. The young writer can find all the primitive material he needs working as a wage slave around the cities and prairies of America.

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In the past eight months the New Masses has been slowly finding its path toward the goal of a proletarian literature in America. A new writer has been appearing; a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self confidence but writes because he must—and because he has a real talent.

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He is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him. His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment. He writes that way because it is the only way for him. His "spiritual" attitudes are all mixed up with tenements, factories, lumber camps and steel mills, because that is his life. He knows it in the same way that one of Professor Baker's students knows the six different ways of ending a first act.

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A Jack London or a Walt Whitman will come out of this new crop of young workers who write in the New Masses. Let us not be too timid or too modest in our judgments. This is a fact. Keene Wallis, for instance, an ex-harvest worker and I. W. W. will take Carl Sandburg's place in five years. Why ought one to hesitate about stating such a conviction.

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The New Masses, by some miracle, has gotten out eight issues under the present management, after the magazine had been declared bankrupt, and was about to suspend. We have received no subsidies; we have earned our way.

We can announce now that another year is certain. We feel that year will be fruitful, and may see further clarification of our groping experiment.

Once more we appeal to our readers:

Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mine, mill and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle.

IGNORANCE AMONG THE LIVING DEAD

By Josephine Herbst

A rejection that is a plain rejection never made me sore. It's all right to be told that it doesn't pay to print stuff like that and think of our audience and we'd like to do it but it can't be done and anyhow I don't like this stuff, what's it about anyhow. That's all right. It's a business. But when somebody swelled up with being connected with publishing begins to tell me how to remodel my works, not, mind you to sell them, but to better them, I see a good deal of red. Where do they get off I want to know? Who gave them the authority to remodel anything? Now your stories are too bitter, what they need is more emotion as if this country wasn't already rotten with emoting authors. You have fine characterization but more tenderness is what you need. Page the Ladies' Home Journal and that tender button, the Bookman. Your work is really too depressing, think, not one character is a hopeful forward looking character. The Russians I suggest timidly, Marcel Proust, and maybe Balzac. But that's a different thing altogether, another age, another side to the face on the barroom floor. What we need today is EMOTION AND TENDERNESS AND MOTHER LOVE. Especially a return of that and of the more wholesome things. And the next thing you do, why not try to make it less—well, less sordid.

Where does this sense of omniscience about writing come from? From the demands of the trade of course, from notions of publicity and what's what. Nobody knows what that is. The dark horse steals in unheralded always to the surprise of the throng.

But really, you are too hard. For a woman, you are too, shall I say, bitter about life and I can't understand why you should be. People do have good times you know, and look at the happy couples you see around you!

CHECKER

Inasmuch as he was nephew of the president
of the Bonner Lumber Mill,
he was a checker
with twice our pay.
It was not that, but his liquor
cost more
to help him forget
our troubles,
NORMAN W. MacLEOD

The "New Negro"

The voice of a Roland Hayes, a Paul Robeson, a Lawrence Brown, the songs of Cullen, Hughes, Toomer, Johnson, and McKay, may wake to ecstasy the cultured bourgeoisie of the North, the absentee Southern landlords, the exploiters of black labor; the intelligentsia of the Negro race may break into rhapsody in praise of their performances. But ten millions of the most ignoble creatures, the most debased, and dehumanized of mankind, ten millions of blacks in the savage South are unaware of their existence. The economic position of these lowly blacks does not change because these New Negroes thrill high heaven with the beauty of their songs.

Actually, the New Negro is still far in the offing. He will come! He must come! But he will not be an aesthete; he will be a revolutionist, finding his milieu in the political arena. He will be a mass leader, a leader of the working class and the working class must buy its freedom with its blood. I do not say that these intellectuals are not completely in sympathy with the black peon and wage slave of Georgia. They are. Of necessity they must be. Their sensitive natures revolt at the persecution of their stricken people, but their intellectual stylized erudite musings, though full of the heart-beat of the black peon, will help that peon not one bit.

The New Negro must demand a new economic policy for his race, a new political program, a new social order. No modification of the old will relieve him from the yoke of oppression. His is not a lone fight. The oppressed of the world will be leagued upon his side. Only through the travail of revolution will he realize his full expression as a man, not through poetry and aesthetics.

WILLIAM L. PATTERSON.

New Masses 4, no. 1 (June 1928): 21. William L. Patterson (1891–1980), communist and black activist, subsequently founder of the Civil Rights Congress and author of the "We Charge Genocide" petition to the UN.

To produce pure proletarian art the artist must be at one with the worker; this is impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist never is at one with any public.

William Empson, "Proletarian Literature," in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935), 14, UMDL Texts.

In the end, glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than glorification of the splendid system that makes them so.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 28.

Poetic subjectivity is itself indebted to privilege: the pressures of the struggle for survival allow only a few human beings to grasp the universal through immersion in the self or to develop as autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves. The others, however, those who not only stand alienated, as though they were objects, facing the disconcerted poetic subject but who have also literally been degraded to objects of history, have the same right, or a greater right, to grope for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded. This inalienable right has asserted itself again and again, in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent—the only forms possible for those who have to bear the burden....Baudelaire...was truer to the masses toward whom he turned his tragic, arrogant mask than any “poor people’s” poetry.

Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:45–46.

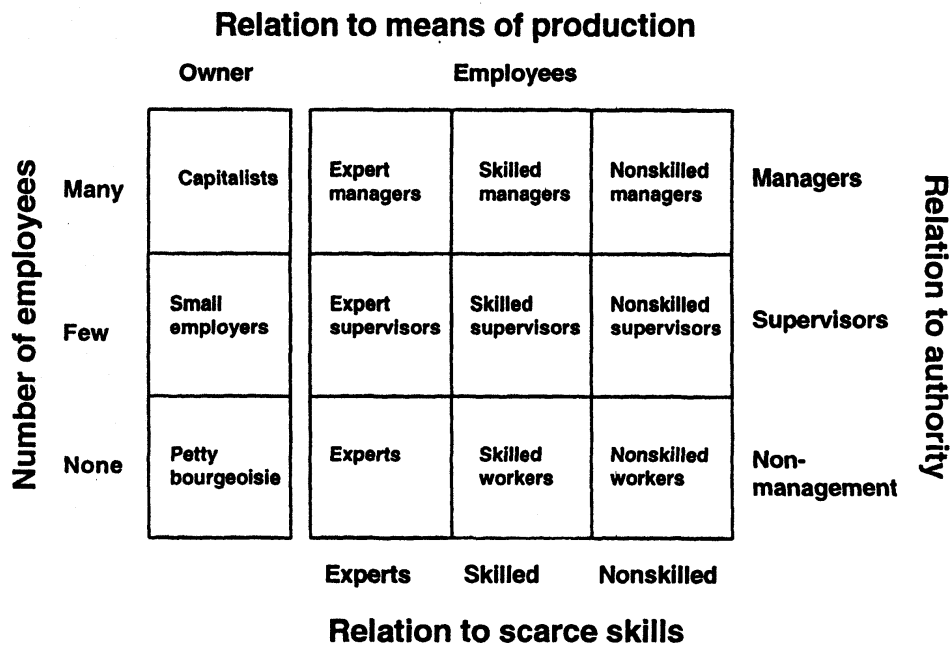


Figure 1.3 *Elaborated class typology*

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25, ACLS Humanities E-Book. Tag yourself.