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Style of the New Era? John Reed Clubs and Proletarian Art

In this essay I address the theme of Proletarian and Revolutionary Art in the United States between 1928 and 1935; that is to say in the years of the so-called Third Period line in the tactics of the international Communist movement. Although the terms »Proletarian Art« and »Revolutionary Art« were often used seemingly interchangeably at this time – or even in adjectival combination – they are not synonymous and I will argue that the distinction points up tensions between different forms of art practice produced in the Communist Party's orbit and to important intellectual confusions. But before analyzing the theory and practice of this art and the reasons for its emergence and decline, I want to say something about its genealogy.

The writings of Marx and Engels provide no validation for the idea frequently associated with Marxism that the movement of the working class to emancipate itself from capitalism and build a classless society requires a proletarian or revolutionary art as an aid to its struggles. (In any case, the first compilation of Marx and Engels' statements on literature and art was not published until 1933 [in Russian] and the first attempt to extract an aesthetic theory from their writings did not appear until two years later as the period I am dealing with was ending).¹ Although they were interested in the propagandist uses of *Tendenzkunst* or *Tendenzliteratur* in spreading revolutionary ideas – that is, in didactic forms of art and literature that pointed to a desired historical outcome – Marx and Engels distinguished such work from true realist art; and while they admired some of the great works of nineteenth-century realist literature, neither were committed to the idea of realism as a transcendental aesthetic.

Having said this, the most prominent Marxists who sought to develop a theory of the arts consonant with Second International Marxism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Franz Mehring and Georgii Plekhanov – were critical of modernist tendencies and favored forms of realism. Thus Plekhanov – whose famous 1912 articles on »Art and Social Life« were often cited by American communist critics even before the appearance of an English translation in pamphlet form in 1937² – decried »art for art's sake« as a phenomenon of bourgeois decay and recommended a utilitarian conception of art. Impressionism and literary Naturalism demonstrated that without meaningful content »realism collapses«;³ while Cubism was just a degenerate form of »art for art's sake« that reduced the tendency to »complete absurdity.«⁴

This kind of thinking was found more widely within the Second International and particularly within its largest member organization, the German Social Democratic Party. Over the years 1910-12 an intense debate over »Tendenzkunst« took place in the

pages of the SPD's central organ, *Die Neue Zeit*, sparked off by an article by the Dutch dramatist Herman Heijermans (pseudonym of Heinz Sperber), who argued that faced with the increasing commercialization of bourgeois art production the leading Social Democratic intellectuals were too passive and uncritical, and their assumption that a socialist art was impossible under capitalism was mistaken. By contrast, he called for an actualized socialist art that would be spread through workers' organizations. Such art would have a »proletarian Tendenz«. Terms such as »Tendenz«, »Klassenkunst«, and »proletarische Kunst« were invoked again and again in SPD debates on art and cultural politics in the years up to 1914.⁵ Although there was certainly considerable interest in German Social Democracy in the much smaller Socialist Party of America – which had 118,000 members at its largest in 1912 compared with the SPD's 970,112 at that point – as far as I know the »Tendenzkunst-Debatte« was not reported in the United States. Discussion of art in *The Masses* (1911-17), the premier cultural magazine associated with the Socialist Party, took place at a much lower theoretical level; after all the SPA did not have Marxism as its official doctrine and many of its leaders regarded Marx's writings as overly theoretical.⁶

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 associated Marxism not only with a new model of the revolutionary party and of revolutionary politics, it also offered a laboratory of socialist culture in the making. This was reported positively in the United States almost from the outset in *The Liberator*, the successor to *The Masses*, which ran from 1918-24 and carried not just dispatches on the revolution by John Reed but also an astonishing conspectus of reporting on the revolutionary wave that swept Europe at the end of the War.⁷ However, although the color covers and numerous cartoons make the *Liberator* visually rich, it was not primarily a cultural magazine. Much of the most authoritative reporting on the Soviet arts in this period was penned by the young Russian-American artist Louis Lozowick, who published a string of articles and reviews in magazines such as *Broom*, *Little Review*, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, and the *Menorah Journal*, which fed in to his short 1925 book *Modern Russian Art* – the first book-length treatment of the theme published in the United States. By 1924 – if not earlier – Lozowick was communist aligned.⁸ But in these years the American Communist Party was still in the process of formation. Rent by ethnic differences and disagreements over strategy, the two communist groupings that emerged from the Socialist Party in 1919 were not united as a single party (the Workers' Party) until 1921, by which point it was reduced to 12,000 members, the majority of whom were Finnish-Americans. It was hardly in a position to spearhead a broad cultural movement.

The American Communist Party never became a truly mass party. Although in 1939 its then General Secretary, Earl Browder, claimed that membership had reached 100,000, he admitted privately it was somewhat less than that.⁹ And in any case that was at the height of the Popular Front. In the 1920s and early 1930s the membership was much smaller. Unlike the Second International, the Third International forced a doctrinal orthodoxy on its member parties and also imposed the Bolshevik model of top down party organization known as »democratic centralism«. The »Bolshevization« of the American Party in 1925 led to a drop in membership to 7,213 in October 1925. By 1927 membership had grown again to around 9,500 and stayed there until 1930.¹⁰ To put these figures in perspective, while the population of Germany was around half that of the United States, its Communist Party had a membership of 350,000 in early 1921.¹¹

Membership of the CPUSA finally rose above 10,000 in 1932 – hitting more than 18,000 after the presidential election in November. But it shrank to under 15,000 the following year.¹² These figures belie the extent of Communist influence in the labor unions and in culture, but they are a necessary backdrop to the rest of my argument.

The Communist Party began to emerge as a political force in 1925-26, when its members helped organize a number of bitter strikes in the fur, textiles, garment, and coal industries. Although it lost to the employers and AFL bureaucracies in most of these struggles, through them the party established a record of militancy and showed its willingness to organize amongst types of worker the AFL craft unions generally ignored.¹³ In January 1924 the party launched a national daily paper, the *Daily Worker* – which carried cultural material from the outset – and some of its members were active in the group that set up the magazine *New Masses*, which had its first issue in May 1926.¹⁴

Joseph Freeman, one of the communists involved in launching *New Masses*, recalled in a 1934 retrospect that the board had been divided between »the mass of editors and contributors« who were liberals and »the small nucleus of revolutionary artists of whom only one or two were party members.« For several years the former were dominant, and the magazine »was not only against serious political discussion; it was also against serious theoretical discussion about art and literature.«¹⁵ This hardly does justice to the rich and interesting contents of the magazine in this period, but it is true that discussions of art and literature were largely lacking in references to Marxist theory and the magazine's flavor was close to that of the pre-war *Masses*. In a report of 1932 Freeman admitted that »we have not in this country in the English language basic Marxian writings about art and literature.«¹⁶

In fact, the character of *New Masses* in the years after it first became a Communist organ was decidedly non-intellectual. As a result of a financial crisis, the magazine appeared intermittently in the first half of 1928 and when the first number of volume 4 came out in June, the communist Mike Gold was announced as the editor with another communist, Hugo Gellert, as art editor. From this point onwards, *New Masses* began to propagate a distinctive proletarian aesthetic, inspired by a highly romanticized vision of the new workers' culture of the Soviet Union. Gold – who seems to have dominated the board until the end of 1930 and remained an important voice in it until it changed from a monthly to a weekly in 1934 – set the tone.¹⁷

Born Itzok Granich on New York's Lower East Side in 1893, Gold adopted his pseudonym during the Red Scare of 1919-20. He had discovered *The Masses* in 1914 and was reportedly so enthused by it that he moved to Greenwich Village. In 1921 he became an editor of *The Liberator*, which published his manifesto »Towards Proletarian Art« in February. This is an apocalyptic Whitmanesque outpouring that calls for »the masses«, the former children of the tenements, to replace the art of intellectuals, which is filled with »solitary pain« and »complexities«, with a new art, »primitive and clean«, filled with the breath of »LIFE«. It was not in the »hot-house air« of little magazines such as *Seven Arts* and *Little Review* that the »lusty great tree« of such art would grow; it was rather in »the fields, factories and workshops of America«.¹⁸

Gold's call has been associated with the 1921 book *Proletcult* by the British Marxists Edén and Cedar Paul, which contained a brief account of the Russian Prolet'kult movement and called for the setting up of a »Red Proletcult International«.¹⁹ But if Gold thought Proletkult was the future of Soviet culture he had got things badly wrong. Alt-

though some Bolshevik leaders such as Lunacharsky and Bukharin were sympathetic to the movement, the party's Central Committee was not prepared to tolerate a mass organization that sought autonomy from the party and by the end of 1920 it was subordinated to the Commissariat for Education. This was at the insistence of Lenin – who had engaged in a series of theoretical disputes with one Prolet'kult's leading figures, Aleksandr Bogdanov, before 1914 – and who thought the idea of making a proletarian culture ex novo was a nonsense.²⁰ Gold was seemingly unaware of all this. In an otherwise favorable review of Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* in October 1926, he took issue with Trotsky's argument that there neither was nor could be a proletarian art: »It is not a matter of theory; it is a fact that a proletarian style is emerging in art. It will be as transitory as other styles; but it will have its day.«²¹

Gold's efforts to promote an American proletarian art in the late 1920s and early 1930s may have found encouragement in the rhetoric of proletarianism and renewed class struggle that were part of the so-called Cultural Revolution that accompanied the launching of the First Five Year Plan in 1928 and of the Collectivization of Agriculture the following year.²² One aspect of the Cultural Revolution was a harsh stance towards non-party intellectuals the beginnings of which was marked by the trial of engineers and technicians from the Shakhty area of the Donbass on charges of conspiracy and sabotage in May-June 1928, followed by purges in schools and universities and anti-bureaucratic campaigns in the government apparatus.²³ Another was what Sheila Fitzpatrick has called the end of »NEP in culture«, and the dominance of a »coercive, ignorant or contemptuous« attitude to »inherited culture« and a valorization of so-called proletarian culture.²⁴ In literature the principle voice of this new »hard line« was the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (or RAPP), which from 1928-32, without any official party mandate, assumed leadership in a campaign to unmask »the rightist danger« in the arts in the name of proletarian purity.²⁵ RAPP's counterpart in the visual arts was the Association of Revolutionary Artists, or AKhRR.

The new turn in Soviet domestic politics was matched by a shift in interpretation of the international situation announced at the Sixth Comintern Congress in July-September 1928, where the so-called Third Period line was defined. This was premised on the view that the capitalist system was entering a new period of crisis that would issue in wars amongst the imperialist states and attacks on the USSR. In the words of the »Theses and Program« adopted on the last day, »When the revolutionary tide is rising, when the ruling classes are disorganized and the masses in a state of revolutionary ferment, when the middle strata are inclined to turn towards the proletariat and the masses display their readiness of battle and for sacrifice, it is the task of the proletarian party to lead the masses to a frontal assault on the bourgeois State.«²⁶ The onset of the Great Depression at the end of 1929 seemed to verify the thesis about capitalism entering a phase of renewed crisis.

Gold described the policy of *New Masses* under his editorship as to make »a non-literary, non-pretentious, non-intellectual magazine.«²⁷ At the start of 1919, after he had seen eight issues through the press, Gold wrote that *New Masses* had been slowly finding its way to a proletarian literature. »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, and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America ... He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has not time to polish his work ... 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.«²⁸ Underlying this was a confidence that a new style of art would emerge organically out of working-class experience.²⁹

In some degree Gold's call for workers to send in their writings and not worry about style – on the model of the worker correspondents in the Soviet Union – was answered.³⁰ The magazine showcased a small cadre of worker writers such as Joseph Kalar (a paper-mill worker and timber handler), Martin Russak (a Paterson textile worker), and Herman Spector, who had taken a whole array of jobs including shipping clerk, truck driver, soda jerker, and factory hand.³¹ Among these was Gold himself, who from June 1928 began publishing autobiographical texts in *New Masses* under the general title »From a Book of East Side Memoirs«. In 1929 these were gathered together in book form as *Jews Without Money*. The most substantial of Gold's literary achievements, this was a mix of reminiscences and character sketches that suggest the irrepressible energies of working-class immigrants living in poverty and squalor. The episodes are by turns violent, brutal, and sentimental. There is scarcely a hint of politics in the book until the final page, where the desperate adolescent narrator hears a man on an East Side soapbox proclaim that »out of the despair, melancholy and helpless rage of millions, a world movement had been born to abolish poverty.« »O workers' Revolution«, Gold writes, »You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.«³²

In itself *New Masses* could not perform the role of building a proletarian culture. Communist organizing of culture required the same mechanisms as the party's organizing in other fields, namely the setting up of fronts to serve as a transmission apparatus between the small vanguard of disciplined communists that made up the party and those sympathizers outside its ranks whose consciousness needed to be raised and energies channeled in useful directions.³³ The name of the main cultural front in the United States was the John Reed Clubs, the first of which was set up in New York by members of the *New Masses* circle in October 1929.³⁴ It is hard to be sure of the scale of the clubs. The »Draft Manifesto of John Reed Clubs«, published in June 1932 claimed there were thirteen clubs »throughout the country«;³⁵ in May 1934 the Communist critic Joshua Kunitz claimed there were thirty.³⁶ An internal memorandum of 1932 gives total membership of the clubs as 735, with the largest being in New York with 160 and the smallest being in Portland, Oregon, and Carmel, California, each with a mere twelve. A later party memorandum gives membership of the New York club as approximately 250 and presumably the membership of other clubs had also grown.³⁷

One thing that can be said with certainty is that the Clubs did not function satisfactorily from the party's perspective. This was partly because they were set up haphazardly and proved hard to weld into a cohesive national organization. Many of the branches contained »very few writers and artists« and most members were »teachers, lawyers, dentists and other types of professional.«³⁸ A party memorandum from 1932 describes many members of the New York club as »uprooted bohemian elements« without abilities.³⁹ While a discussion document circulated in the New York Club in 1931 or 1932 described the clubs' object as to provide »a functioning center of proletarian culture; to clarify and elaborate the point of view of proletarian as opposed to bourgeois culture; to extend the influence of the club and the revolutionary working class movement«,⁴⁰ this

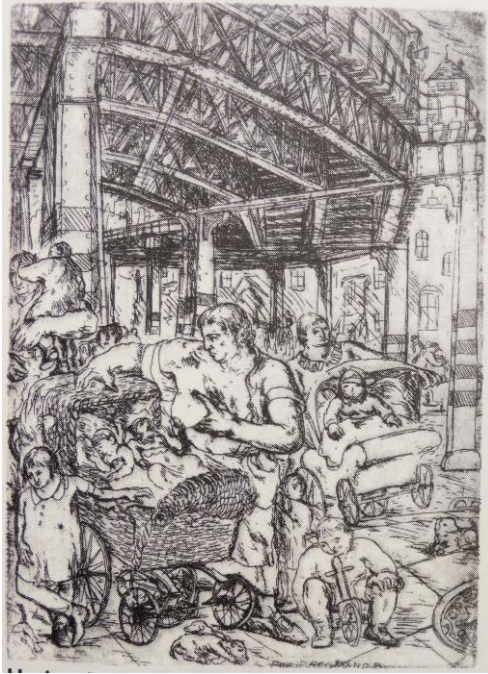


Fig. 1: Philip Reisman, *The Working Class Mother*, 1928

sponded most closely to Gold's literary practice and that of the worker writers was that of artists such as Philip Reisman and Raphael Soyer. Not coincidentally, both were like Gold the children of Jewish immigrants, though unlike them Gold was born in the United States. Reisman – whose father worked in the sweatshops of the Lower East Side – quit high school after his first term and took part time jobs as a soda jerk and waiter while studying at the Art Students' League. In 1927-28 Reisman learnt etching from Harry Wickey and made his own printing press out of »an old colander machine«; over the next two years he made 62 etchings, around half of which were scenes of working-class life on the Lower East Side. Two of these – *A Worker's Clinic* and *The Working Class Mother* – were illustrated in *New Masses* in August 1928, and three more were published in the magazine in the early 1930s. Reisman also probably showed two prints at the November 1932 exhibition at the ACA Gallery, *Twenty John Reed Club Artists on Proletarian and Revolutionary Themes* and five at the Club's *Social Viewpoint in Art* exhibition in early 1933. I say »probably« because from the title alone one cannot be sure of a work's medium and sometimes Reisman treated the same motif in both print and oil painting.⁴²

Some of Reisman's prints are strikingly close to Gold's imagery in *Jews Without Money*: I quote Gold: »The street never failed them. It was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea ... People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers.« »In the maelstrom of wagons, men, pushcarts,

emphasis on proletarianism rubbed against the imperative to draw fellow travelers into the movement.

In late 1930 *New Masses* and the John Reed Clubs sent a six-man delegation to a Conference of Revolutionary and Proletarian Writers at Kharkov in the Ukraine, which was organized by the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature and dominated by RAPP. But although the Program of Action that the delegation brought back emphasized that the American comrades should extend »the proletarian base« of the movement »by drawing in new proletarian elements«, they were also instructed to win over »radicalized intellectuals«. The delegates reported that this was not a perfunctory injunction: the Plenum had warned that the »straightjacket of sectarianism ... must be fought in all countries«.⁴¹ In fact the clubs had been set a contradictory agenda.

The form of visual art illustrated in *New Masses* and exhibited at the John Reed Club's art exhibitions that corre-



Fig. 2: Raphael Soyer, *Waterfront*, 1934

street cars, dogs and East Side garbage, the mothers calmly wheeled their baby carriages. They stopped in the shade of the Elevated trains, to suckle their babies with big sweaty breasts.⁴³ This is precisely the realm of social phenomena depicted in *The Working Class Mother* (Fig. 1) and *Peddlers Under the »L«*, both from 1928). Reisman's prints lack dexterity. His figures are often disproportioned and disarticulated, his perspective structures are haphazard and almost invariably out of true. Yet this crudeness maybe gave the prints the quality of immediacy and authenticity Gold was looking for. Reisman's work also found some surprising admirers. Alfred Stieglitz bought some of his etchings and the modernist aesthete Lincoln Kirstein praised his paintings for their authenticity in the avant-garde magazine *Hound and Horn*.⁴⁴ Politics seldom enters Reisman's prints directly. We get a taste of it in the mutilated veterans performing tricks in *Exercise and Keep Cheerful*, with the satirical reference to Hoover in the title; but the representation of a meeting in Union Square suggests no more than a generalized solidarity and is equivalent to Gold's weak conversion experience on the last page of *Jews Without Money*.⁴⁵

Raphael Soyer, my other example, came from a modest middle class background. His father was a scholar and teacher, and the Soyer family lived in the Bronx, not the Lower East Side. Like Reisman he supported himself with part-time jobs while studying first at the Cooper Union and then at the National Academy of Design. So far as I can discover, Soyer exhibited only three works at the John Reed Club exhibitions – although in his recollections he emphasized how important the club had been in helping him »to acquire a progressive world outlook.«⁴⁶ He showed a lithograph or a drawing with the title *No*

Help Wanted at the 1932 show, and an exhibit titled *Park Bench* at that in early 1933. I have not found a catalog for the third exhibition in which he showed.⁴⁷

Far more technically sophisticated than Reisman's prints, Soyer's *Waterfront* (Fig. 2) – a 1934 lithograph based on a painting he had made in 1932 – is highly calculated in the way it uses perspective and chiaroscuro to suggest listless inactivity and boredom in a stilled and oppressive dockyard landscape.⁴⁸ The vertical axis of the idle crane contrasts with the recumbent posture of most of the figures. The advertising slogans are irrelevant in a world without work. Steep perspective lines bring us to an abrupt halt in a striking contrast between dynamism and stasis. The title *Park Bench* suggests the motif of Soyer's important 1934 painting, *In the City Park*, and this motif was already schematically present in a lithograph of 1930⁴⁹ – although that image depicted Washington Square, where the statue is of Garibaldi, not Washington, as in Union Square. *In the City Park* is likely to be the painting *On the Public Square* that Soyer exhibited at a commercial gallery on 57th Street in 1935. This too illustrates Soyer's gift for using what seem orthodox naturalistic devices to unsettling effect. The lack of clear spatial markers beyond scale, the cut-off of the foreground figures, the complex array of heads, the woman's face on the billboard seeming to stare at us over their faces, and so on. But Stephen Alexander, the *New Masses* art critic, gave it only lukewarm praise. Like »an increasingly large number of artists«, Soyer had been »strongly affected by the tragic spectacle of unemployment.« But his images of faces that showed »despair and resignation« did not »constitute a healthy tendency in revolutionary painting.«⁵⁰

Art that represented proletarian miseries, however empathetically, might not meet the measure of Revolutionary Art, partly because it was often hard to distinguish from the small scenes of contemporary life by numerous artists working in a naturalist mode loosely indebted to the Ashcan School who did not subscribe to Communist politics. Others involved with the Club also claimed proletarian identities but combined this with a more muscular concept of Proletarian Art that could also be classed as »Revolutionary«.

Jacob Burck was probably the paradigmatic proletarian artist of the New York John Reed Club.⁵¹ Born Yankel Bochkowsky in Poland in 1904, Burck grew up in Cleveland where he attended the Art School before moving to New York on a scholarship in 1924. He began making cartoons for the *Daily Worker* in 1927 and in 1929 became the paper's staff cartoonist.⁵² The Communist Party prided itself on its cartoonists and from 1926 to 1930 published annual volumes of *Red Cartoons* printed on good quality paper.⁵³ In the early 1930s Burck, Fred Ellis, and William Gropper were the foremost of these. Another cartoonist, Robert Minor – who was a member of the Communist Party's Executive Committee – had provided the rationale for such art in an article of 1925 titled »Art as a Weapon in the Class Struggle«, a formulation that was a popular catch phrase in the years of the Third Period line.⁵⁴ Such art impressed outside communist circles. In 1934 the modernist art and theatre critic Sheldon Cheney wrote of the illustrations in the communist press, »there is nothing in the ›regular‹ press to approach the vitality of the drawings appearing in such newspapers as *The Daily Worker* and such magazines as *The New Masses*. I speak not of the human content alone, but of that joint plastic-formal and human-feeling expressiveness which alone can make this sort of thing lastingly significant.«⁵⁵

Burck was singled out for special treatment in 1935 when the *Daily Worker* published a 250-page volume of his cartoons under the title *Hunger and Revolt*, with eleven essays by prominent communists and communist sympathizers including the British Marxist John Strachey and the French author Henri Barbusse, whose great autobiographical novel of the First World War, *Le Feu* (1916), was an international bestseller. In his Introduction Barbusse claimed that the images in the book were not exaggerated but exact representations of the »monstrous beings« that made up contemporary reality: »It is necessary that you penetrate to this reality, that you see the truthful core of these presentations.«⁵⁶ Further testimony to Burck's status is provided by the fact that in the fall of 1935 he traveled to the USSR for a spell of eighteen months working as a cartoonist for *Pravda*. But while Burck's cartoons were one of his qualifications as a revolutionary proletarian artist, they were not the only one.

Within the John Reed Club Burck had a reputation as a formidable polemicist who was widely read in the history and theory of art.⁵⁷ His occasional pieces in the *Daily Worker* certainly show him as a capable writer, and in 1935 he published an article »For Proletarian Art« as part of a debate in the *American Mercury*. Burck did not counsel jettisoning the example of bourgeois artistic traditions – as Gold sometimes seemed to advise authors – rather, the challenge for the proletarian artist was »to bring to life, with the aid of revolutionary social thought, the inanimate body of technical principles developed by the best of bourgeois civilization.« Even good examples of »art for art's sake« could embody sound aesthetic principles, while Revolutionary art in an »unpalatable plastic state« could be called neither art nor propaganda. But the day of individualistic bourgeois art was over; the proletarian artist had to create an art informed by the collective social philosophy of Marxism.⁵⁸ In some mysterious way, that would presumably issue in new form.

The new form for collective philosophy was to Burck and many of his comrades the mural. This was partly because of the imposing example that the Mexican Mural Renaissance provided of a modern revolutionary art seemingly directed at a mass audience. Diego Rivera's criticisms of the USSR and his association with both Trotsky and the Communist Party's Lovestoneite Opposition made him a problematic model.⁵⁹ In a review of Rivera and Bertram Wolfe's book *Portrait of America* in the *Daily Worker* in 1934 Burck attacked Rivera's murals in the United States as »not much more than Sunday supplement rotogravure layouts compared with his compelling paintings of the Mexican Revolution.«⁶⁰ By contrast, many American Communists were drawn to the example of Orozco – especially his Dartmouth College Murals; and despite his notorious apolitical stance he maintained friendly relations with *New Masses* and the John Reed Club. In 1935 the *New Masses* art critic described him as »the greatest artist of our time in the Western hemisphere.«⁶¹ Siqueiros – the only committed Stalinist among Los Tres Grandes – spoke at least three times at the John Reed Club when he was in New York in 1934 for his exhibition at Delphic Studio and also spoke at the communist Film and Photo League.⁶²

In its disjointed space, expressive distribution of lights and darks, and schematic facial features, the visual idiom of Burck's 1934 lithograph *The Lord Provides* resembles that of Orozco's print *Out of Work* – which was one of four works by him shown at the John Reed Club's *Social Viewpoint in Art* exhibition in 1933.⁶³ While for all Burck's denunciation of Rivera, the flowing rounded forms of the demonstrators supporting their



Fig. 3: Jacob Burck, *Death of a Communist*, 1932

dying comrade in *Death of a Communist* (Fig. 3) resembles that of Rivera's figures in *Drillers* (1931), one of the portable fresco panels the artist had shown at his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art from December 1931 to January 1932.⁶⁴ *Death of a Communist* was exhibited at the Society of Independent Artists' Annual exhibition in 1932 and although almost certainly an oil painting has an upturned composition and very limited markers of pictorial depth that suggest a mural conception.⁶⁵ (Sheldon Cheney called it a »mural«).⁶⁶ Amongst the nearly 1,000 works on exhibition at Grand Central Palace, Burck's picture certainly caught the attention of Margaret M. Salinger, the reviewer for the College Art association's magazine *Parnassus*. »Communism dominates the interest of many

of the exhibitors«, she wrote, and »the large picture by Jacob Burck... though poor in color, is strong and solid in its drawing and its action, and sets the note for this large group of paintings.« Although this judgment finds no echo in the other reviews of the show I have seen, *Death of a Communist* was praised in one of the most prestigious art magazines of the period.⁶⁷

Unfortunately, we are not in a position to evaluate Burck's work of this time. The fate of his five large panels on the theme of socialist construction in the USSR under the First Five Year Plan – which were shipped to Moscow for the office of Intourist – is unknown.⁶⁸ But they appear to have been blandly affirmative and to match the notion of »revolutionary romanticism« that Zhdanov and Gorky recommended at the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934.⁶⁹ It seems unlikely that *Death of a Communist* and related works survived Burck's turn against communism in the late 1930s or the Immigration and Naturalization Service's attempt to deport him in the early 1950s for having entered the country illegally on his return from Moscow in 1936.⁷⁰

1935 was the high point of the Communist Party's attempt to forge a proletarian revolutionary art in the United States. In that year the party's publishing house, International Publishers – which had shown little interest in literary and artistic material⁷¹ – published a substantial anthology of short stories, poetry, reportage, plays and criticism under the title *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, which went through three printings.⁷² A *New Masses* competition for a novel on a proletarian theme was won by Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!* – which, whatever its shortcomings, was certainly an experimental attempt to conceive a novel with a collective subject.⁷³ And in October *New Masses* marked the start of a new volume with a Revolutionary Art issue. However, the signs were not altogether auspicious.⁷⁴

The one-page introduction to the *New Masses* issue, »Revolutionary Art Today«, is attributed to »Thomas S. Willison«. This is almost certainly a pseudonym and in my view the text was probably written by Meyer Schapiro, or by someone close to him. Certainly whoever it was had a high level of art-historical knowledge. After comparing the situation of modern painters with that of writers, the author historicizes the lack of interest in the human subject in the work of Matisse and Picasso in terms similar to those Schapiro used in his paper on the »Social Bases of Art« given at the American Artists' Congress early in the following year.⁷⁵ While their style had »historical necessity«, it did not have »the eternal validity that is claimed for it«.

But art was not simply a »synthesis of form and subject« and the talented revolutionary modernist could not just inject a new content into his art. Part of the problem was that no »classic representations« of the »most striking and common aspects of the world he wishes to render« had yet been established. So that when artists depicted »the demonstration, the picket line, and the unemployed, or... obvious personifications of the capitalist class«, they rendered them as spectacles: »the appearance or composition of the scene predominates over its inner life«. Commonplace naturalism akin to the photographic snapshot also would not do. The artist, »must develop, if he wishes to attain the desired intensity or comprehensiveness, formal devices which, while foreign to the snapshot appearance, are capable of widening and deepening the scope of the meanings in a representation.« In this regard the revolutionary cartoon and mural were exemplary, because while they were »much less realistic than the corresponding easel pictures and often recall the creations of abstract art... they are, in consequence, far more compact or extensive, pointed or thorough in their realism.«⁷⁶

The twenty-eight works illustrated hardly met Willison's expectations. Indeed, one detects a note of disappointment in the issue's Editorial. The magazine had reported in September that 250 artists had been invited to contribute; but in the event around 100 submitted works, which were judged by a committee of eight that included the modernist Stuart Davis along with familiar names such as Burck and the communist cartoonist and printmaker Russell Limbach. Some able revolutionary artists had not submitted, the Editorial noted, and then observed: »The reproductions... give only a partial view of the character of the art of American revolutionary painters and of artists who are concerned sympathetically with the same materials, but who are not revolutionary in standpoint.«⁷⁷

Considering the twenty-eight illustrations by Willison's criteria there was little that was »revolutionary«. The images of homeless and unemployed men by Raphael Soyer and Nikolai Cikovsky were accomplished examples of modern naturalism, but, as we have seen, such art was regarded as lacking in revolutionary credentials. Through markers of an impending walkout Selma Freeman injected a hint of what critics often referred to as »the will to struggle« in her *Strike Talk* (Fig. 4) but it remains essentially a genre painting. As does George Picken's *Strike*. If Joe Jones's *Demonstration* seems to offer more, both formally and ideologically, it is partly because the artist's rather crude – but none the less quite effective – modernist approach to pictorial space brings the work closer to a mural conception. Similarly, Siporin's *The Powderly Circular: Cyrus McCormick and Terence V. Powderly* (Fig. 5),⁷⁸ one of the remarkable series of drawings on the theme of the Haymarket Martyrs that the artist made for an unrealized book of lithographs – were certainly related to his ambitions as a mural painter.⁷⁸ And Joseph Vogel's *America* is clearly a mural sketch. The fact was, of course – and this remained



Fig. 4: Selma Freeman, *Strike Talk*, c. 1935

unstated – that modest sized easel paintings, the market basis for most painters’ livelihoods, did not lend themselves to strong political statements. The character of paintings as a commodity form did not enter the discussions.

Neither did the concept of avant-garde. And this despite the fact that advanced work in cinema, theatre and music that treated revolutionary themes in technically innovative ways was readily available to American communists in New York and other northeastern cities. A skim through advertisements in the *Daily Worker* turns up showings of many of the most important Soviet films of the period: Eisenstein’s *Potemkin* and *October*; Pudovkin’s *Mother* and *Storm Over Asia*; Dovchenko’s *Earth*; Protazanov’s *Aelita*;⁷⁹ and Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*,⁸⁰ among others.⁸¹ Equally impressive was the presence of advanced exercises in the political aesthetic from Germany. Pabst’s 1931 film version of Brecht and Weil’s *Threepenny Opera* was shown in April 1933 at the RKO Cameo at Broadway and 42nd Street, at the same time as Brecht and Slatan Dudow’s *Kuhle Wampe, oder: Wem gehört die Welt?*, with music by Hans Eisler, was showing at the nearby Empire Theatre.⁸² Brecht and Eisler were both in New York in person in 1935; there were concerts of Eisler’s music and Brecht’s *Mother* was performed by the Theatre Union. The theoretical positions of both were quite extensively

reported.⁸³ Although there is less evidence of interest in German photography, painting and the graphic arts, Willi Münzenberg's *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (AIZ) was certainly available in the years around 1930.⁸⁴

On 24 September 1934 Siqueiros spoke on »the Future of Film« at a symposium of the Film and Photo League; Meyer Schapiro was one of the panelists.⁸⁵ But although Burck reviewed Pudovkin's *Mother* that same year,⁸⁶ I have found no published reflections by American revolutionary artists from the Third Period years on the profound challenges that developments in photography and film posed to notions of realism in the traditional visual arts – challenges that artists such as Dix, Grosz, and Siqueiros so profoundly registered. By comparison with communist criticism of literature, theatre and film in this period that on the visual arts seems very thin, with the exception of Schapiro's contributions. Whereas developments in Soviet literature were reported in detail, developments in the

visual arts received very scanty coverage. *New Masses* did not carry regular art criticism until the latter part of 1934,⁸⁷ and while Stephen Alexander's art reviews are not without interest or insight, they offer no sustained reflections on the technical and formal challenges facing revolutionary art. Communist critics, it seems, could write in quite complex ways about the challenges posed by the stream of consciousness novel, Eliot's poetry, and Schoenberg's music, but not about Cubism or Surrealism.⁸⁸ Statements like Burck's about the need to build on the technical discoveries of modernist painting did not rise above generalities. It was not until the 1934-35 years that writers capable of a more sophisticated technical criticism began to appear, first in the pages of the Artists' Union magazine *Art Front* and later in *New Masses* – notably the critics Charmion von Wiegand and Charles Humboldt, and artists such as Stuart Davis.⁸⁹

The evidence suggests that there were strongly conflicting tendencies among communist aligned artists during the Third Period years, but that those who were dominant in the *New Masses* and John Reed Club circles until 1933-34 were like the RAPP writers and their painter counterparts in AKhRR in the USSR, those who asserted most violently their proletarian and revolutionary credentials and decried as mere fellow-travelers those whose works did not produce an immediate effect of militancy or political utility. There was little basis for developing an aesthetically compelling art practice in this position;



Fig. 5: Mitchell Siporin, *The Powderly Circular: Cyrus McCormick and Terence V. Powderly*, 1934-35

but in any case, by 1935 the ground was sliding away under the feet of Revolutionary Art's sectarian proponents. There were two factors at work here.

First, in the Soviet Union the policy of attacking bourgeois specialists and the accompanying Cultural Revolution were abandoned in 1931, and indeed went into reverse. In the following year, RAPP was closed down along with AKhRR and all other artistic groupings by the so-called April Decree. The new slogan of »Socialist Realism« began to enter critical discourse around all the arts and effectively became the official party line with the Soviet Writers' Congress in August 1934. These developments filtered through into the pages of the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*; the Soviet Writers Congress was extensively reported and its proceedings were partially published in English translation in 1935. In 1934, Joshua Kunitz, the party's leading expert on Russian literature, published six articles in *New Masses* that under the title »Literary Wars in the USSR« began to explain why RAPP had to be dissolved despite the services it had performed.⁹⁰

The second and related factor was the dissatisfaction of senior party cultural organizers with the activities and character of the John Reed Clubs. One symptom of this is the complaint of the literary critic Granville Hicks in *New Masses* at the end of 1934 that John Reed Club members throughout the country were spending their energies putting out little revolutionary magazines that cost huge energy but often lacked a clear function; Hicks thought the situation smacked of »Bohemian individualism and irresponsibility« and was »entirely incompatible with the serious tasks of revolution and the intelligent discipline of revolutionaries.«⁹¹ Twelve months before a *New Masses* editorial had praised these same magazines as the »first seeds of the genuinely profound and variegated revolutionary culture« that heralded proletarian victory.⁹²

Hicks's comment heralded the change of line announced by Alexander Trachtenberg for the Central Committee of the Communist Party at the John Reed Club Convention in Chicago in September 1934. The delegates were effectively told that they should organize a National Congress of anti-fascist writers within the next eight months, and the artists should follow with a similar conference for artists. These organizations were to end the »opposition between the intellectuals of our movement and the party organizers.«⁹³ What many of those present in Chicago may not have realized was that this was also the end of the John Reed Clubs. Although the decision to phase out the Clubs and replace them with the League of American Writers and the American Artists' Congress was not part of Popular Front tactics – the Popular Front was not announced until Georgi Dimitrov's speech to the Seventh Comintern Congress in August 1935 – it clearly anticipated them.⁹⁴ The needs of anti-fascist solidarity with sympathetic artists and writers of liberal and progressive views trumped the ambitions of those quixotically striving to build a proletarian revolutionary culture in the United States.⁹⁵

Does this mean that a flourishing movement to forge a Revolutionary Art was cut off in the bud by Communist Party fiat? I do not think so. As we have seen the numbers involved were very small and the theoretical and practical problems raised by such a project were never effectively addressed. In the end, Gold and his artist allies were deluded by their anti-Trotskyism – that reflex of triumphant Stalinism which they encountered at the Kharkov conference – into thinking Trotsky's judgment on Proletarian Culture was invalid. But actually the case Trotsky made against »Proletarian Culture and Art« in *Literature and Revolution* was never answered. The proletariat had no artistic

culture,⁹⁶ Trotsky argued, for if it had taken centuries to create the great achievements of bourgeois culture, how could a class as immiserated and starved of cultural and intellectual resources, with so little access to the »apparatus of culture – the industries, schools, publications, press, theaters, etc.,« possibly be expected to create one in a few years when they were either involved in the revolutionary struggle to overthrow bourgeois class rule or, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, striving to build the material conditions of socialism.⁹⁷ While Trotsky had a keen sense of art's relative autonomy, Gold seemed to have none. Style was not born with a class, Trotsky argued, a class found its own style in complex ways by working on the materials of previous class cultures.⁹⁸ It was »impossible to create a class culture behind the backs of a class« by force of will.⁹⁹ Exponents of proletarian art simply espoused a »reactionary populism«. ¹⁰⁰ A small cadre of artists working from what was imputed to be the standpoint of the proletariat could not in itself deliver new world-historical artistic forms.

This essay began life as a lecture to accompany the 2014 exhibition at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, titled The Left Front: Radical Art in the »Red Decade«, 1929-1940. It was first published in Against the Current, nos. 177 (July/August 2015) and 178 (September/October 2015). It appears here in a slightly revised and corrected form.

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- 1 A second enlarged edition of *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* appeared in 1937. The first American equivalent did not appear until York 1947. An English translation of Mikhail Lifshits's *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (1935) was published by the party-aligned Marxist Critics' Group in New York in 1938.
 - 2 E.g., Joseph Freeman: »Literary Theories« In: *New Masses*, 4, no. 12, May 1929, p. 13: »Since Plekhanoff little has been added to the general theory of art, but important specific applications have been made.« According to Freeman the bulk of these have come out of USSR, but he made an exception for the writings of Wilhelm Hausenstein. See also A. Gurstein: »Art and Class« In: *New Masses*, 8, no. 5, December 1932, pp. 8-9.
 - 3 G.V. Plekhanov: *Art and Social Life*. London 1953, pp. 192, 215.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 177, 193, 218.
 - 5 Tanja Bürgel (ed.): *Tendenzkunst-Debatte 1910-1912*. Berlin 1987.
 - 6 Leslie Fishbein: *Rebels in Bohemia: The Radicals of the Masses, 1911-1917*. Chapel Hill 1982, chapter 9. For the magazine's visual aspect, the essential source is Rebecca Zurier: *Art for the Masses: A Radical Magazine and its Graphics, 1911-1917*. Philadelphia 1988.
 - 7 Floyd Dell: »Art under the Bolsheviks« In: *Liberator*, 2, no. 6, June 1919, pp. 11-18. For art in *The Liberator*, see Rachel Sanders: »The Voice of the Liberator« In: *Left History*, 17, no. 2, 2013.
 - 8 Louis Lozowick: »A Note on Modern Russian Art« In: *Soviet Russia Pictorial*, 9, no. 6 June 1924: 164-45, 168. Review of Lozowick, Modern Russian Art, *The Workers' Monthly*, August 1925, p. 470. For Lozowick, see Andrew Hemingway: *The Mysticism of Money: Precisionist Painting and Machine Age America*. Pittsburgh 2013, chapter 3.
 - 9 Harvey Klehr: *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*. New York 1984, pp. 367, 475 n. 4.

- 10 Theodore Draper: *American Communism and Soviet Russia*. New York 1986, chapter 7, and pp. 187-90. Cf. Klehr 1984 (as note 8), pp. 91, 429 n. 15.
- 11 The population of the U.S. in 1930 was 123m. +; population of Germany in 1925: 62 m.
- 12 Klehr 1984 (as note 8), p. 91.
- 13 Bert Cochran: *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions*. Princeton, NJ 1979, chapters 1-3; Albert Fried: *Communism in America: A History in Documents*. New York 1997, pp. 19-21.
- 14 For *New Masses* in these years, see Hemingway 2013 (as note 7), pp. 34-51; Andrew Hemingway: *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, New Haven and London 2002, chapters 1-2.
- 15 Joseph Freeman: »Ivory Towers – White and Red« In: *New Masses*, 12, no. 11, 11 September 1934, p. 21.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 17 *New Masses* got a new Executive Board at end of 1930 and from that point the editorial »Notes of the Month« was attributed to »The Editors« and not to Gold solo. On the reorganization of *New Masses* in early 1931, see Memorandum Concerning the Reorganization of the Literary and Professional Sections of the Movement, in Joseph Freeman Papers, Hoover Institute, Stanford University, 172-8, 5.
- 18 Michael Gold: »Towards Proletarian Art«. Reprinted in: *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*. Ed. Michael Folsom. New York 1972, p. 70.
- 19 Eric Homburger: ~~American Writers and Radical Politics 1900-1939: Equivocal Commitments~~, Basingstoke and London 1986, pp. 120, 166.
- 20 Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks*. 2 vols. London 1991, 1992. vol. I, 75-85. The Pauls described Bogdanov as »the most uncompromising and unquestionably the most interesting, among the Russian theorists of Proletcult« (p. 94), and quoted from a German translation of his essay *Die Wissenschaft und die Arbeiterklasse* from 1920. Eden and Cedar Paul, *Proletcult (Proletarian Culture)*. London 1921.
- 21 Michael Gold: »America Needs a Critic« Reprinted in: Gold 1972 (as note 17), pp. 136-37.
- 22 E.g., N. Stevens: »A Glance at Collective Farming in the Soviet Union« In: *Daily Worker*, 28 November 1930.
- 23 Sheila Fitzpatrick: »Cultural Revolution as Class War« In: Fitzpatrick (ed.): ~~Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931~~, Bloomington, IN 1984, pp. 9-10, 21-25. Cf. »Sabotegers Finish Story of How War Was to Start Against USSR« In: *Daily Worker*, 29 November 1920; Page Arnot: »What the Moscow Trial Reveals« In: *Daily Worker*, 1 December 1930. For a cognate attack on intellectuals in the U.S. context, see »To John Dos Passos« In: *New Masses*, 10, no. 10, 6 March 1934, p. 8.
- 24 Sheila Fitzpatrick: »The »Soft« Line on Culture and its Enemies: Soviet Cultural Policy, 1922-1927« In: *Slavic Review*, 33, June 1974, pp. 285, 270.
- 25 Fitzpatrick 1984 (as note 23), pp. 28-30.
- 26 In Fried (ed), 1997 (as note 14), p. 110.
- 27 Michael Gold: »Brisbane, We Are Still Here!« In: *New Masses*, 4, no. 3, August 1928, p. 2..
- 28 Michael Gold: »Go Left, Young Writers!« in Gold 1972 (as note 17), pp. 188-89. On Gold's proletarian aesthetic, see Daniel Aaron: *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*. [1961] New York 1992, pp. 205-14; James F. Murphy: *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature*. Urbana and Chicago 1991, pp. 64-68.
- 29 After his return from a conference in the Ukraine in 1930 he wrote: »New art forms come into being, not as the result of some critic's ratiocination, but as the result of a new universal feel-

- ing. I repeat, we here share this feeling. / What I am driving at very clumsily I this; there will surely be a new great proletarian style in all the arts, because at this congress, one can sense the reality of the new universal feeling at work in the minds of sensitive artists.« – Michael Gold: »Notes form Kharkov« In: *New Masses*, 6, no. 10, March 1931, p. 4. This position was not accepted by other would-be cultural apparatchiks. E.g., see J.Q. Neets [Joshua Kunitz]: »Let Us Master Our Art« In: *New Masses*, 6, no.2, July 1930, p. 23. Presumably this was the subject of the debate between Gold and Kunitz announced in »John Reed Club to Hold Debate on Workers' Art« In: *Daily Worker*, 24 June 1930.
- 30 Michael Gold: »Write for Us!« In: *New Masses*, 4, no. 2, July 1928, p. 2. See also: »Call for First Congress of Worker Correspondents« in *Daily Worker*, 31 May 1929.
- 31 See Aaron 1992 (as note 29), pp. 210-11.
- 32 Michael Gold: *Jews Without Money*. London 1948, p. 209.
- 33 Draper 1986 (as note 11), pp. 171-85.
- 34 Jacob Burck: »For a Proletarian Art« In: *American Mercury*, 34, no. 135, March 1935, p. 335.
- 35 »Draft Manifesto of John Reed Clubs« In: *New Masses*, 7, no. 12, June 1932, p. 4; A document in the Lozowick Papers [Archives of American Art, unfiled], headed »JRC Data, First National Congress, May 28-29, 1932« suggests this was an underestimate.
- 36 Joshua Kunitz: »A Note on Max Eastman« In: *New Masses*, 11, no. 6, 8 May 1934, pp. 24-25. A second memo in the Lozowick Papers, »John Reed Clubs & Groups« indicates there were certainly at some time clubs in other cities than those listed in »JRC Data«.
- 37 »Memorandum Concerning the Reorganization of the Literary and Professional Sections of the Movement« in the Joseph Freeman Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, 1.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 1. The haphazardness is confirmed by Gold's speech at Kharkov. See *Literature of World Revolution*, November 1931 [Special Number on the Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers], pp. 184-85.
- 39 »memo« probably by Freeman, in Joseph Freeman Papers, dated 1931, but datable to 1932 on internal evidence.
- 40 »Proposals for Activities of John Reed Clubs« in Hugo Gellert Papers, Box 4, unfiled, Archives of American Art.
- 41 »The Charkov Conference of Revolutionary Writers« In: *New Masses*, 6, no. 9, February 1931, pp. 7, 8. The delegates were: Fred Ellis, Michael Gold, William Gropper, Joshua Kunitz, A.B. Magil, and Harry Alan Potamkin. Homberger 1986 (as note 20) is interesting on questions around Kharkov.
- 42 For the JRC exhibitions, see Hemingway 2002 (as note 15), pp. 47-67. For Reisman's prints, see George D. Bianco: *The Prints of Philip Reisman, Catalogue Raisonné*. Bedford, NY 1992.
- 43 Gold 1948 (as note 33), pp. 11, 40.
- 44 Lincoln Kirstein: »Philip Reisman« In: *Hound & Horn*, 6, no. 3, April/June 1933, p. 443.
- 45 The prints are illustrated in Bianco 1992 (as note 43), p. 18. On the problem of the conversion ending, see Alan Calmer: »The Proletarian Short Story« In: *New Masses*, 16, no. 1, 2 July 1935, pp. 17-19.
- 46 Raphael Soyer: *Self-Revelment: A Memoir*. New York 1969, pp. 72, 79, and more generally pp. 70-79.
- 47 Soyer showed a »small sketch« at a non-juried show in 1935 – see Abraham Harriton: »Interesting Art Exhibition By John Reed Club Members« In: *Daily Worker*, 15 March 1935.
- 48 Frank Gettings: *Raphael Soyer: Sixty-five Years of Printmaking*. Washington, DC 1982, cat. no. 25.
- 49 *Ibid.*, cat. no. 16, titled *Sleep*.

- 50 Stephen Alexander: »Art: Raphael Soyer and Arnold Blanch« In: *New Masses*, 14, no. 11, 12 March 1935, p. 28. I discuss *In the City Park* at length in Hemingway 2002 (as note 14), pp. 71-73.
- 51 Listing those he regarded as »ideologic and cultural guides« to the club in early 1934, Lozowick named Phil Bard, Jacob Burck, Hugo Gellert, and Philip Reisman. He could also have listed himself. See Louis Lozowick: »John Reed Club Show« In: *New Masses*, 10, no. 1 2 January 1934, p. 27.
- 52 For biographical details, see Walt Carmon: »Jacob Burck: American Political Cartoonist« In: *International Literature*, no. 3, March 1935, pp. 82-83; Jacob Burck: *Hunger and Revolt: Cartoons by Burck*. New York 1935. p. 247; »Jacob Burck Returns Home« In: *Daily Worker*, 1 April 1937; *Who's Who in America*, 41st edition, 1980.
- 53 On *Red Cartoons*, see Carmon 1935 (as note 51), p. 82, which claims 25,000 copies were sold for \$1.00 each.
- 54 Robert Minor: »Art as a Weapon in the Class Struggle« In: *Daily Worker*, 22 September 1925.
- 55 Sheldon Cheney: *Expressionism in Art*. [1934] New York 1939, p. 369.
- 56 Henri Barbusse: »Introduction« in Burck 1935 (as note 51), p. 7.
- 57 Carmon 1935 (as note 51), p. 82.
- 58 Burck 1935 (as note 35), pp. 336-37. Cf. Stephen Alexander on Revolutionary Art in »Quintanilla's Etchings« In: *New Masses*, 13, no. 10, 4 December 1934, p. 28.
- 59 The Communist Party had expelled its Trotskyists in 1928 and the Bukharinite Jay Lovestone and his followers the following year. See Draper 1986 (as note 10), chapters 16-18.
- 60 Jacob Burck: »A Portrait of Diego Rivera – The Story of a Bird in a Gold Frame« In: *Daily Worker*, 19 May 1934.
- 61 Stephen Alexander: »Art: Orozco's Lithographs« In: *New Masses*, 17, no. 8, 19 November 1935, p. 29.
- 62 In his *Daily Worker* column of 7 April 1934 Mike Gold implicitly valorized Mexican muralism above the example of Soviet painting and hailed Siqueiros as its most important practitioner. See Andrew Hemingway: »American Communists View Mexican Muralism: Critical and Artistic Responses« In: *Crónicas*, nos. 8/9, March 2001/February 2002, pp. 26-31.
- 63 Illustrated in Anite Brenner: »Orozco« In: *New Masses*, 8, no. 7, February 1933, p. 22.
- 64 For which, see Laurence P. Hurlburt: *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*. Albuquerque, NM 1989, pp. 123-25.
- 65 »The Independents' Show« In: *New Masses*, 7, no. 11, May 1932, p. 29.
- 66 Cheney 1939 (as note 55), p. 346.
- 67 Margaret M. Salinger: »16th Annual Exhibition, The Society of Independent Artists« In: *Paranassus*, 4, no. 4, April 1932, p. 18.
- 68 For reports on Burck's murals, see Louis Lozowick: »Magnificent Murals by Burck Depict Soviet Achievements« In: *Daily Worker*, 18 January 1935; »Burck Mural on Exhibit« In: *Daily Worker*, 14 January 1935; »Five American Murals on the Soviet Union – by Jacob Burck« In: *International Literature*, no. 3, March 1935, pp. 82-83; Stephen Alexander: »Art: Murals by Burck and by Laning« In: *New Masses*, 14, no. 4, 22 January 1935, p. 26. Although both Lozowick and Alexander praised the works' achievement, both indicated limitations to Burck's painting technique.
- 69 Maxim Gorky, et. al.: *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism*. London 1977, pp. 21, 41, 44.
- 70 »Deport Hearing for Sun-Times Artist Near End« In: *Chicago Tribune*, 31 December 1952; »Plan Appeal of Decision on Burck« In: *Chicago Sun-Times*, 9 July 1953. The work could al-

so have been destroyed in the house fire that was the cause of Burck's fatal heart attack in 1982 – Lloyd Green: »Cartoonist Burck Dies after Blaze« In: *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 May 1982.

- 71 For Gold's complaint on this matter, see »Proletarian Literature« In: *New Masses*, 6, no. 4, September 1930, p. 4. Gold's charge was rebuffed by Max Bedacht in »The »New Masses« and Proletarian Literature« In *Daily Worker*, 18 September 1930.
- 72 Granville Hicks et. al. (ed.): *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology*. New York 1935. It went through ~~three printings: 1935, 1936, 1937~~.
- 73 Clara Weatherwax: *Marching! Marching!* New York 1935.
- 74 Hicks et. al. (ed.) 1935 (as note 71), pp. 18-19.
- 75 Meyer Schapiro, »Social Bases of Art« In: Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (ed.): *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*. New Brunswick, NJ 1986.
- 76 Thomas S. Willison: »Revolutionary Art Today« In *New Masses*, 17, no. 1, 1 October 1935, p. 17.
- 77 »Revolutionary Art« In: *New Masses*, 17, no. 1, 1 October 1935, p. 4; On the formation of committee etc., see »Between Ourselves« In: *New Masses*, 16, no. 6, 6 August 1935, p. 30; »Between Ourselves« In: *New Masses*, 16, no. 10, 3 September 1935, p. 30.
- 78 Discussed briefly in Hemingway 2002 (as note 14), p. 160
- 79 Advertisement in *New Masses*, 4, no. 11, April 1929, p. 17.
- 80 Advertisement in *New Masses*, 5, no. 4, September 1929, p. 17; Em Jo Basshe: »Movies: USA and USSR« In: *New Masses*, 5, no. 5, October 1929, pp. 15-16, .
- 81 The major survey of soviet arts by American communists – Joseph Freeman, Joshua Kunitz, and Louis Lozowick: *Voices of October*. New York 1930 – was not published by the party's press and was out of date almost as soon as it appeared. For the reception of Soviet culture in the U.S., see Barnaby Haran: *Watching the Red Dawn: The American Avant-Garde and the Soviet Union*. Manchester 2016.
- 82 For reports/reviews of *Kuhle Wampe*, see *Daily Worker*, 20, 21, 22 24, April 1933. For the *Threepenny Opera*, see *Daily Worker*, 24 April 1933.
- 83 For reports/reviews of Eisler, see *Daily Worker*, 23 February, 1 March, 6 March, 13 March, 25 October, and 19 December 1935. For reports/reviews of Brecht, see *Daily Worker*, 31 October, 22 November, and 6 December 1935. Piscator's idea on theatre had been reported in *New Masses* as early as 1929 – see Erwin Piscator: »The Social Theater« In: *New Masses*, 5, no.2 July 1929, p. 14. His production of Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy* was performed at the Hedgerow Theatre in Philadelphia in 1935 – see Herbert Kline: »The Theatre« In: *New Masses*, 15, no. 9, 28 July 1935, p. 28.
- 84 Advertisement for *AIZ* in *New Masses*, 6, no. 2, July 1930, p. 18. *AIZ* may have got harder to obtain after production moved to Prague in 1933.
- 85 »Siqueiros Will Speak on Future of Film at Symposium Tonite« In: *Daily Worker*, 24 February 1934.
- 86 Jacob Burck: »Mother – 1905 Is Stirring Drama of Toledo, Ohio, 1934« In: *Daily Worker*, 31 May 1934.
- 87 To judge from the printed record, Lozowick played a surprisingly small role in these debates.
- 88 For an extreme case of critical myopia, see the dismissal of Léger's work in »Current Art« In: *New Masses*, 17, no. 5, 29 October 1935, p. 30.
- 89 An exception is: Charmion von Wiegand: »David Alfaro Siqueiros« In: *New Masses*, 11, no. 5, 1 May 1934, pp. 18-21.

- 90 Kunitz's six articles on the »Literary Wars in the USSR« appeared in *New Masses* between 12 and 7 August 1934. Kunitz makes clear the centrality of RAPP to his concerns in »Divided Loyalties« In: *New Masses*, 12, no. 6, August 1934, p. 20. The articles were in answer to Max Eastman's critique of Soviet literature in the articles that he published in book form in 1934 as *Artists in Uniform*. For another account of the demise of RAPP and new dispensation, see Robert Gessner: »A Task for the Writers' Congress« In: *New Masses*, 15, no. 1, 2 April 1935, p. 39.
- 91 Granville Hicks: »Our Magazines and Their Functions« In: *New Masses*, 13, no. 12, 18 December 1934, pp. 22-23.
- 92 Editorial in *New Masses*, 10, no. 1, 2 January 1934, p. 5.
- 93 Orrick Johns: »The John Reed Clubs Meet« In: *New Masses*, 13, no. 5, 30 October 1934, p. 26. On the secret history of this change of course, see Aaron 1992 (as note 28), pp. 280-83.
- 94 »Call for an American Writers' Congress« In: *New Masses*, 14, no. 4, 22 January 1935, p. 20; »Call for an American Artists' Congress« In: *New Masses*, 17, no.1, 1 October 1935, p. 33.
- 95 *New Masses* claimed that there were 200 delegates at the first LAW Congress in May 1935 and that 4,000 attended. See »The League of American Writers« In: *New Masses*, 15, no. 6, 7 May 1935, p. 7. At time of its first Congress in 1936, the AAC claimed »about 350 members« – »The Artists Congress« In: *New Masses*, 18, no. 8, 18 February 1936, p. 20. On the formation of AAC, see Baigell and Williams (ed.) 1986 (as note 75), pp. 8-10.
- 96 Leon Trotsky: *Literature and Revolution*. [1925] tr. Rose Strunsky. Ann Arbor, MI 1971, p. 203.
- 97 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 98 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 99 *Ibid.*, 193.
- 100 *Ibid.* 205. »The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture.... The formless talk about proletarian culture, in antithesis to bourgeois culture, feeds on the extremely uncritical identification of the historic destinies of the proletariat with those of the bourgeoisie. A shallow and purely liberal method of making analogies of historic forms has nothing in common with Marxism. There is no real analogy between the historic development of the bourgeoisie and of the working class«. *Ibid.*, 186.