



BACKGROUND TO ERROR

By ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

IN NEW MASSES' discussion on American left-wing writing to which Albert Maltz contributes in this issue, one area remains dim and another has been left blank.

The dim area is that of the achievements of left-wing criticism, which are considerable in lasting effects though not in lasting works. Here I can only refer to them. They can be summed up as follows: Largely through the efforts of the left-wing critics the analysis of the social interrelationships of a work of art has been established as a standard critical procedure; and left-wing critics have succeeded in shifting the stress, in the general estimation of the artist's role, from dissociation from the community to his integration with it.

But in this article my concern is with the blank space in the picture. If it is not now filled in, the discussion will leave us with a partial and unbalanced view.

The blank space is the background. So far the discussion has been carried on as if the conditions of our left-wing criticism have been determined solely by us; as if the present development is what we had wanted, and the deficiencies are our personal deficiencies of which we are, at last, penitentially aware.

If this were so the problem would be simple. It is comparatively easy to acknowledge errors and make resolutions to reform; and it is dangerously easy to "correct" the error in the old-fashioned way of a plunge into opposite error. The hard and the necessary thing is to analyze the error, and this cannot be done without an accompanying analysis of the social context of the error. For we were not the only ones involved in it.

Engels, speaking of the role of the individual in history said: "History makes itself in such a way that the final result always rises from conflicts between many individual wills, of which each again has been made what it is by a host of particular conditions of life. Thus there are innumerable intersecting forces which give rise to one result—the historical event. This again may

itself be viewed as the product of a power which, taken as a whole, works *unconsciously* and without volition. For what each individual wills is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed. . . . Each contributes to the resultant and is to this degree involved in it."

The resultant of the struggle, now fourteen years old, for an American Marxist criticism is certainly not what I had willed, or any left-wing critic had willed. But, if we understand what has occurred we may, in the coming stages of the struggle, bring about effects closer to our will.

II

THE recent and, historically, most important phase in American left-wing criticism began, so far as such a sweeping movement can be exactly dated, with the participation of a large group of writers in the campaign of the Communist Party candidates in the 1932 presidential elections. Thus this literary movement opened with a political act, and a pragmatic pattern was set for its subsequent activities.

It seemed natural then to organize groups of writers for political action and postpone such activities as founding Marxist literary magazines. Today, with very few left-wing organs exert-

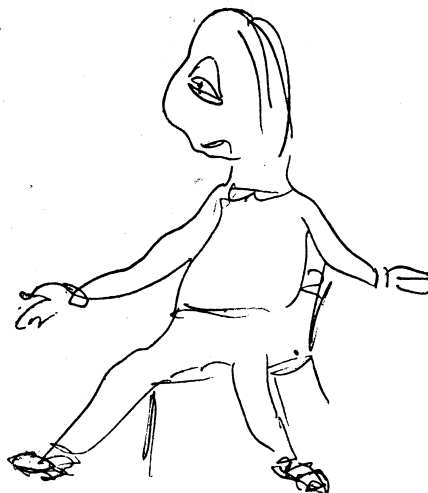
ing any authoritative influence in American culture, we may question the validity of that emphasis: It also seemed more important, then, for writers to concern themselves with immediate political emergencies than to elaborate a Marxist critique. Today we wish that their objectives had had a further range.

For three or four years, roughly corresponding to the years of the New Deal advance, the literary left wing was on the offensive. Had its victories held, had it been allowed space and time to develop, it would undoubtedly have grown out of its emergency-mindedness. But it was not given the time. It became one of the first victims of the years of reactionary counter-offensive which in the 1936 Presidential campaign sent the New Deal into retreat. Then followed the immobilizing of the Left during the late hush-hush, when our criticism, suddenly confronted with sacred cows on every side, stood still.

Hostile critics like Alfred Kazin picture the period of the left-wing offensive as a domination which the Left lost through ineptitude. But the "domination" extended to nothing more than a brief hospitality in the pages of *The New Republic*; occasional, begrudged toleration of a Marxist voice in other journals; and a brief speculation by book publishers on "proletarian" fiction. This small inroad was overestimated by the Left as well. Perhaps because of it, on the assumption that bourgeois publishing houses and magazines would always be available, and more important to us anyway, we neglected the opportunity—and task—of building an effective publications apparatus of our own.

Actually these inroads were of less consequence than the gains in the WPA cultural projects. The fields here were open to talent and energy. And it proved to be the Left that had the talent and energy. All critics are agreed that the projects contributed enormously to American culture and that had their development been continuous and free, they could have nurtured a mature American theater, music, art and literature.

But the situation of the projects was



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ever precarious. They lived on congressional sufferance, and were the targets of capitalist pressure groups. Immediate political struggle was the condition of their existence. They were Red-baited, in some cases, into impotence; they were slowly starved out and finally killed.

Thus a conditioning of political emergency characterized every stage of the development of the cultural Left. It is for that reason that the achievements of left criticism are to be found not in the esthetic but the social dialectic of art.

The emergency-mindedness in Left culture was intensified during the reactionary counter-offensive. One of its first effects was the stream of defections from the entire progressive front, with those from the Left being the most publicized. Analysis would show that the Communists and their immediate allies held together better than any other sector of the line, but it was to the interest of the reaction to focus attention on the Communists to give the impression that the very core of radicalism was cracking.

In direct ways, as by the Dies and the other un-American committees, and by Hearst and Roy Howard, the renegades were put to use as stools against their former comrades. As editorial doors were shut to the Left, restricting it to its own starved press, these kept renegades "put the finger" on Left teachers and other professionals and brought about their dismissal from their positions. Thus Left intellectuals were not only denied access to the general press, including, with meager exceptions, the liberal periodicals, but, through fear for their livelihoods, they were denied access even to the Left press. We have the amazing spectacle of an American democracy that, while it condescendingly lectures the rest of the world on this theme, effectively denies an important intellectual minority freedom of expression—as it does to racial minorities. This has had a destructive effect not alone on the Left. Since recent creative impulses have come mainly from the Left the blight has spread over the entire intellectual life of the country. The situation somewhat resembles that of Pilsudski's Poland under the "cold pogrom."

In addition renegades were called into capitalist cultural institutions as a sort of ideological shock troops against the Left. The resulting special polemics tended to rarify our political discussions, withdrawing it from the earth of American political life, while at the same time

heightening the tensions and keeping our cultural work in the instability of emergency thinking.

Then came the overriding emergency of war.

III

As we enter the postwar stage of our struggle can we expect things to become simpler for us? The answer is *no* if we continue on the old terms. Reaction certainly will not voluntarily allow life to become easier for us. And should the labor movement attain greater unity and wrest the initiative from reaction, our tasks will multiply along with our opportunities. We shall be as submerged as ever in emergency.

But the answer can be *yes* if we make a wise use of our fourteen years of experience. For we can so redirect our course and reallocate our energies as to make sure that we are not again left without the reserves and the strong points to be secured by, among other things, works of permanent standing, and a Marxist critical structure of compelling authority.

This does not mean, of course, what I referred to above as the plunge into opposite error, any abstraction from the struggle. It means for writers to make themselves formidable *as writers*, to train themselves for their part in the class struggle *as writers*, to perfect the *literary* weapons of the struggle.

Through failing to do so before, through being stamped by every emergency, we suffered a continuous wastage of talent and energy. It has been in the power of the enemy to provoke emergencies. By reacting to everything we have allowed him to dictate the terms of our cultural struggle. How much this has been conscious strategy on his part it would be difficult to say. But, conscious or not, the provocations have had the effect of exhausting our energies and keeping us in confusion.

Let us take it for granted that the enemy, of his own volition, will not allow time for a normal, full, unfrustrated development of the Left. Let us take it for granted that none of his facilities, except occasionally and then for motives of his own, will be at the disposal of the Left. Let us never again mistake exceptions, such as a few progressive books among thousands, or a few clear voices in the radio babel, etc., as "trends."

As it looks to me a program for a Left culture that will favor a development closer to our wills should include:

1. A campaign to restore citizenship

to intellectuals of the Left. To prepare this campaign we must first ourselves be aware how, bit by bit, we have been stripped of our civil rights until we ourselves react not against the repression itself but against accusations of Communism, as if that were the injury. If we become militantly aware of this we will recognize the principal cause of our difficulties and not censure our gasping but strike at the strangling hand. For example, court action, where feasible, should immediately be taken to reinstate teachers and other professionals who have been deprived of their jobs. In this we can count on the backing of labor and liberals. Such a campaign will do more to hearten the fearful than moral exhortations. With the confidence of organized action and support, the silent will soon declare themselves and there will be brought back into function a host of able and fertile minds whom the "cold pogrom" has kept inert.

2. The Left should undertake a wider range of book publication than it has in the past and a wider range of magazine publication. It should work toward establishing a theater, and even a cinema of its own. That is, so far as possible, it should create its own cultural facilities. For, let us finally realize, the existing facilities are in the control of the enemy, however varying the degrees of his consciousness of that control. Such opportunities as we have to use these facilities we should take full advantage of but without the illusion that they are ours except by temporary suffering, and that we can ever afford to drop our own.

3. The emergency-mindedness and crude political determinism of the past should be abandoned in our writing and particularly in our criticism. We should have a longer range for our work. It is not out of a criticism serving tactical needs but out of a criticism serving basic needs that basic principles can be developed. Such writing will bring to our hands better weapons to meet emergencies than any of the improvisations we have devised.

4. Finally, in our day-to-day reviewing, we should avoid the mistakes so clearly shown by Maltz and touched on in my article. These mistakes are the results of a confusion of standards. The first confusion has been in elevating political tactics into political principles. This has led us into judgments that were disproportionate or, in the light of later tactics, wrong. The second confusion has been to stretch the artistic valuation to cover the political valuation. As a device, conscious or unconscious,

to induce people to buy books for which we desire a large circulation, this fails, in the long run—for readers develop defenses against it. If a work has important political values these values should and can be made so exciting and pressing that readers are drawn to it for them alone. To ascribe values that are not there is merely to impose unnecessary disappointments upon the reader. Our readers were indulgent to us when we did this for they themselves recognized our motives, but they gave a qualified attention to our judgments. It will be better for us all if our readers do not find it necessary to make qualifications. And when our judgments are free from such confusions of values, they will gain the authority that can extend our influence.

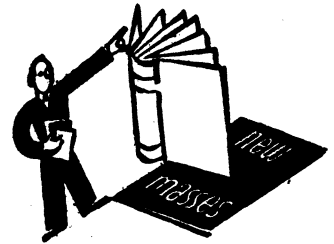
Remembering Slavery

LAY MY BURDEN DOWN, edited by B. A. Botkin. University of Chicago Press. \$3.50.

CERTAINLY no other segment of our history has been more distorted, or ignored for that matter, than that which concerns the American Negro. Written for the most part by historians who were apologists for the South, a legend has been created which has become so much a part of our thinking that few of us even bother to challenge it. A handful of historians like Carter G. Woodson, Henrietta Buckmaster, and recently Herbert Aptheker* are the only names that come readily to mind. This legend, that slavery was a benevolent institution and the slave, while not welcoming bondage, was happy and docile in servitude, has been the basis for one of the best selling novels of all time—*Gone With the Wind*; it has also, in the case of the historians mentioned above, been sharply debunked as mere myth. On the surface the truth might seem to be found in *Lay My Burden Down*, a collection of reminiscences of ex-slaves, ably edited by B. A. Botkin, Fellow of the Library of Congress in Folklore.

Yet such is not the case and I am sure that Mr. Botkin, who has wisely subtitled his collection "A Folk History of Slavery," would be the first to object if it were so interpreted. Within the limitations he has imposed it makes a valuable contribution to our store of knowledge of slavery times and the partial emancipation which followed. It is rich in folk humor and imaginative thought processes, and of old people

* ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO. International Publishers. \$2.



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