

Dos Passos in American Society

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Abstract

During the First World War, the United States emerged as a global superpower, but citizens observed the misery and horrible deterioration of American society. Fruit pickers and farmers in the United States have suffered greatly as a result of the Great Depression, the Wall Street Crash, and the rise of capitalism. Steinbeck drew inspiration from Karl Marx's revolutionary thought, which advocated for a classless society with a dialectical connection between the wealthy and the poor. John Steinbeck cares deeply about the struggle of the working class. Throughout his works from the 1930s and 1940s, Steinbeck shows a good grasp of the concepts of Communism. Among Steinbeck's best-known works is *The Grapes of Wrath*, which tells the story of how "farming became industry" in the Dust Bowl era of the 1920s. *Manhattan Transfer*, by John Dos Passos, is an example of his extreme vision. I believe that Dos Passos's politics are based on a desire to enable the individual worker escape the political machine while gaining control over his physical equipment. "Midcentury, the last of Dos Passos's works to be published during his lifetime, is examined as a continuation of the themes and political reasons of the US series in the third chapter of my dissertation. Because of this, critics who have characterized his latter works as right-wing propaganda have neglected to read his last book carefully; in fact, they have concentrated almost solely on his personal life rather than his writing, I suggest. Because of his political views, critics tend to see Dos Passos as a divisive personality, despite the fact that his books themselves are politically moderate.

Keywords: *Degradation, Polarizing, Motivations, Struggle, Critical.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Like Dos Passos, he has a modernist outlook. For the most valuable kind of work, "American writers who want to do the most valuable kind of work will find themselves searching for the deep currents of historical change beneath the surface of opinions... there is no doubt that the stylistic composition of the U.S.A. is very much in line with this claim" (*The Writer as Technician*, 172). Regardless of the prevailing social and cultural paradigms, Dos Passos believes that there is an underlying history that persists under the surface of the systemic cacophony. Epistemological boundaries are clearly defined in literary representations when it comes to perceiving empirical or concrete reality: "No one is ahead of their times; it is only that their particular variety of creating their times is that which their contemporaries who also create their own times refuse to accept" (Stein 422). Writers who do not believe in portraying their period are denying the reality that they cannot be absent from it, in Stein's opinion. Stein's position Writing in the style of the modernist authors like Dos Passos or Woolf or Stein is an important part of the modernist tradition. Their primary focus is on language's discourse and how it relates to or deviates from early twentieth-century social and cultural perspectives.

John dos Passos was at the peak of his brilliant career in 1930. He was well-respected as a writer by political factions on both the left and the right, actively involved in causes he believed in like the Emergency Committee for the Southern Political Prisoners (the Scottsboro Boys), and newly married to Katy Smith, with whom he was enjoying his friendships with other literary luminaries such as Ernesto G. Smith. He published *The Forty Second Parallel*, the first volume of his trilogy USA, that year to critical acclaim. After the release of USA in 1938, Dos Passos's first book after the trilogy was met with dismay by reviewers, who realized that his disenchantment with the political left had robbed him of much of his artistic strength. The decade ended, and the literary collapse had started. While his marriage to Katy remained blissful, Dos Passos' connections with literary luminaries like Ernest Hemingway had dwindled to an alarming degree after his withdrawal from many of his leftist activities.

It is a crucial part of his persona as a writer and political theorist that John Dos Passos's worldview changed dramatically between the end of the U.S.A. trilogy in 1936 and the beginning of *Adventures of A Young Man* in 1938. Throughout his literary and political career, Dos Passos' literary and political life, this event has been

acknowledged as the most critical turning point. Dos Passos' political reversal is examined in light of his contemporaneous reformulation of the relative imaginative power of the past and future, which is examined in this essay. Critics have noted Dos Passos' shift away from revolutionary futurism and toward a nostalgic historicism, but they have not paid enough attention to his simultaneous rejection of one and embracing of the other. At all times, Dos Passos' political ideas were thoroughly incorporated with his literary attitude. After discovering that the Communists in Spain had attempted to hide the killing of poet José Robles, Dos Passos broke with the political left and began writing novels with a more conventional narrative style and a strong nationalist bent. He also began researching Spanish history. After the Spanish Civil War in 1937, he turned his back on Europe and the modernism that had previously inspired his work. A more traditional narrative order appealed to Dos Passos since he had previously used the tactics of Italian futurism, Russian futurism, and Russian constructivism in addition to poetic techniques of simultaneism.

2. MECHANICAL STATE IN THE U.S.A. TRILOGY

Dos Passos is difficult to classify as a political writer since he does not support any one political system, yet his books are certainly politicized, but for what purpose exactly? If Dos Passos does not believe in any other system of thinking, what is the fundamental flaw of capitalism that he is screaming against in his books? What is Dos Passos trying to convey? Why does he do this? In what way does the United States function as a trilogy? One must begin by returning to Sacco and Vanzetti and Dos Passos' inspiration for composing the trilogy. 'In Dos Passos' summary of the case for the New Masses in 1926, he imagined that Sacco and Vanzetti came to the United States in hopes of living in free communities of artisans and farmers and fishermen and cattlebreeders who would work for their livelihood with pleasure, because the work was itself enjoyable in the serene white light of a reasonable world' (MNP 90-91). Sacco and Vanzetti lived in an urban setting, and Vanzetti even worked in a factory, thus the pastoral character of Dos Passos's utopian ideal seems rather strange. In any case, it seems to be more Dos Passos's vision than that of the Italian immigrants, who may have seen the United States as a site where such communities might be established, although it is not apparent whether that is the case. At no point do Sacco and Vanzetti indicate urban living is a problem, despite their stated desire to improve working-class lives and destroy capitalism.

However, Dos Passos often makes the idea. When he wrote his play *Airways, Inc.* for the New Playwrights Theater before beginning work on the USA trilogy, it was less about socialism and more about the perils of contemporary existence in an industrial environment (despite the political motivations of the New Playwrights). The drama chronicles the lives of the Turner family as they struggle to find their place in a tiny, unnamed American town that serves as a microcosm of the rest of the nation. According to Dos Passos, the play was an effort to develop 'socially creative ideas,' the new myth that must be constructed to replace the imperialist prosperity myth in order to have the machinery of American life ever under social control (qtd. in Aaron 348-349). As a result of the criticism of modern technology in Dos Passos's play, critic Edmund Wilson said that the play made him want 'to rush to defend even the American bathroom, and even the Ford car'—which in fact, one begins to reflect, have perhaps done as much to save people from the helplessness... as all the prophets of revolution' (34). Wilson contends that *Airways, Inc.*, connected machinery and a drive to produce with moral inadequacy and a tendency to exploit other human beings. It was not simply physical risk that Dos Passos saw in contemporary technology, but also mental, emotional, and spiritual harm. Dos Passos, for example, was surprised by the lack of outrage after the Ohio prison fire of 1930 and blamed contemporary technology for diminishing the capacity of Americans to feel empathy. Following World War I, he observed, 'the fast automation of life has utterly blunted the creative reaction that is physiologically rooted in sensations of pity and compassion' (MNP 131).

When Dos Passos was still at Harvard, he began warning others about the perils of science and the steel-girded goddess, with her halo of factory smoke and her buzzing chariot wheels of industry, leading the parade of human thinking which follows so tamely in her trail' (qtd. in Pizer 31). He claims that science has created a "irrelevance-clutter" that has kept the arts from flourishing, and that it has done so at the expense of the humanities and the arts of creation (33). Dos Passos was troubled by the machine's literal and metaphorical qualities. As many contemporary directors do, he imagines robots as sentient entities who strive to annihilate humans at times. To him, the novel *Erewhon* by Samuel Butler was intriguing for several reasons, chief among them the chapter titled 'The Book of the Machine,' in which the author describes how the people of *Erewhon* banned all complex machinery for fear that it would one day become conscious and enslave the human race. 'According to Dos Passos, there is a deep thinking in this idea' (33-34). There is a similar notion in *Airways, Inc.*, when Professor ponders, "In a million men's hearts, the thinking develops, in a million machines' hearts, the will is there" (73).

In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos also pays tribute to the Wright brothers. When it comes to taking off from Kill Devil Hill and playing "Diabolo in the Tuileries gardens," the book has an apocalyptic tone. Wright brothers "do not appear like they were very much impressed by upholstery and braid and the gold awards and procession of plush horses, they remained practical mechanics," Dos Passos writes in his last paragraph (BM 225). The perfect artisan, in Dos Passos' view, is the innovator who keeps focused on his task and is not distracted by fame, recognition, or the prospect of financial gain. The achievement of one's idea may stay unspoiled by its future applications if one's intentions are in the correct place. While Dos Passos despises the Wright brothers' machine, he also admires their achievement, and this appears to be especially true of the brothers.

Like *Airways Inc.*, air travel in the United States has a risky, even reckless quality. The trilogy contains three flight-related deaths, none of which result from air combat and all of which feature a circumstance that heightens the risk of the flight; Buddy Trent's plane was not properly maintained, Bill Cermack and Charley Anderson crashed on a test flight, and Daughter finds her flight spinning out of control after climbing into the cockpit with a drunk driver. Final biography of a vagabond features the novel's most famous picture of an aircraft. Suddenly, the story shifts from the vagabond trying to walk and hitchhike a 'hundred miles down the road,' to the businessman flying above. Although the transcontinental passenger covers a lot of ground, unlike the vagrant, the business traveler is just passing through and does not have a chance to see or experience the nation. While the vagabond has slept 'near frozen beartracks in the Yellowstone,' the traveler can only detect a faint scent of sweetgrass above Cheyenne.

3. SOCIALISTIC VISION

When Dos Passos wrote in his piece "America and the Pursuit of Happiness" in *The Nation*, he voiced his concern for individual liberty: "We must halt the economic battle, the fight for the survival of man against man" (778). Author John Steinbeck was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which depicts the hardships endured by small-town American farmers and calls for more social responsibility. The book is a social protest novel since the author focuses on capitalism's negative impacts. Steinbeck used his empathy and moral concern to represent the condition of the outsiders, the alienated, the vanquished, and the downtrodden working class in his writing. Because of his sympathy for the fruit pickers and farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010. A fierce assault was launched by Steinbeck against the capitalist dogma that promoted profiteering, exploitation, and materialistic desires against the merchants and bankers. The Joad family is the focus of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ma and Pa Joad and their six children form the basis of the family. Revolutionary book *The Grapes of Wrath* challenges the American literary culture, which has never portrayed the working class, in Steinbeck's groundbreaking novel. In *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (2007), Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy emphasized the novel's revolutionary character. The narrative of *The Grapes of Wrath* depicts the history and lifestyles of white share cropping farmers in Oklahoma who have been uprooted and dispossessed. Taking up this issue, Steinbeck used a simple, colloquial, and poignant approach to express the struggle of the proletariat. A spokesperson for the "American Underclass" or "those stranded at the bottom" became his calling card. Steinbeck takes aim at the agricultural machinery that holds farmers captive.

I could not tell whether the figure on the iron chair was male or female... He was more attached to the bank than the property... Without desire, he could appreciate the orgasms set by gears and record them carefully (John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* 48). Classic narrative of American proletariat's fight against nature and harsh business community is depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*. By making fun of the greedy capitalists who take advantage of the impoverished farmers and the poor, Steinbeck exposes and mocks their callousness and inhumanity on a grand scale. With its sad narrative and a call to action against America's capitalist system, this work is a protest novel with a message that is both universal and personal. Farms have been taken over by the banks and the major landowners, forcing hundreds of thousands of small farmers; share croppers, off of their land. It is in the same vein as Dos Passos' trilogy *U.S.A.* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but with more intensity and grandeur than the latter two. An epic of pain, the book chronicles the rural hardships of the author's family. Three generations of the same family were compelled to relocate to an unknown location. Death, abandonment, and starvation all feature prominently in the narrative. It is true, however, that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a study of rural society. His portrayal of socioeconomic situations is striking, and Gorky and Lucas describe the story as one of "social realism."

Obviously, John Steinbeck has used the power of fiction in an uncompromising way for the betterment of mankind throughout his works. In his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck held up a mirror to his own place and times. Unlike Zola and Dos Passos, this work is concerned with the plight of the farmers, and its themes and tone are reminiscent of ancient literature. Steinbeck was "exhausted" when he completed the book in 1938,

according to Jacobson, and the physicians recommended him to rest completely. Despite the fact that the book was released as a "document" rather than a novel, it is important to point out that this is not the case now. "The Grapes of Wrath is a novel where in naturalism has gone berserk, where truth has run amuck drunken upon prejudice and exaggeration, where matters economic have been hurled beyond the pale of rational and realistic thinking," wrote George Thomas Miron in *The Truth About John Steinbeck and the Migrants* (1939). (5). migrant workers' voyage may be traced back to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt in the Bible, which Steinbeck has written thirty chapters on.

It begins with a gloomy tone, then the protagonist appears like he emerges from jail in *Manhattan Transfer* by Dos Passos. Tom learns that his family is residing with his uncle, ten miles away, and that they are also ready to relocate. Only Muley Gravis remains in hiding from Sheriff's men in this whole rural village. In an empty home, he stalks the hallways "like an old cemetery spirit." The next morning, Tom's uncle and the rest of the family are getting ready to leave the property, as per the instructions of the Sheriff. The eviction of the farm from Steinbeck's novel is presented in a heart-wrenching manner. Because "women and children understood deep in themselves that no sorrow was too big to endure if their husbands were whole," the ladies are portrayed observing their men (7). The family seems to be in a state of confusion and bewilderment as they are engulfed in commotion. Ma Joad is shown by Steinbeck as a fearless warrior, a lady of incredible bravery and spirit.

As a response to the anxieties of the American people about urbanization and technology, Dos Passos released his book *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). As Sinclair Lewis (1925) put it: "Dos Passos could be the founder of humanized and alive fiction. Even the big white boar Mr. Joyce's *Ulysses* could not compare to *Manhattan Transfer* for Lewis in terms of literary quality (*Saturday Review* 361). Its "breathless realism" was praised by the reviewers, and Dos Passos was praised for his ability to portray the plight of middle-class Americans who moved to big cities like New York in quest of better lives and better employment. In its flashes, cuts, and speed, Dos Passos used cinematic methods. It has been said that Dos Passos is indebted to avant-garde art and the films and theater of Eisenstein. Two hundred episodes of the novel's storyline revolve around half a dozen persons, illustrating the novel's topic of societal and cultural emptiness. Throughout the narrative, the city of New York serves as a character. When relating the activities of people to historical events in Dos Passos's chapter "Nine Days' Wonder," he employs the film methods of "News Reels," "Camera Eye," and "Biographies."

In *Manhattan Transfer*, John Dos Passos captures the characters' wacky musical ideas as they race about in their minds on the page. As they peruse the headlines of newspapers and the phrases on the fronts of restaurant menus, they reflect on the emptiness of their existence. This approach was quite helpful in conveying the temperament, interests, and personalities of the characters in the works. To enhance the novel's narrative, the "montage sequence" of events from the past and the present is used. New Yorkers hurry home around five o'clock, and Dos Passos is interested in producing that picture. With the "Newsreel" style, the vision offered is of a genuine motion film, which gives an insight into the true voice of modern events. These occurrences are not highlighted for their shock value, but rather for how they relate to the novel's central themes. Their "crazy scraps of music" in their thoughts serve as an indicator of their monotony and boredom and the dullness of their surroundings in *Manhattan Transfer*. All the ugly, greedy, hunger for money, and human depravity has been shown in Dos Passos' novel. Skyscrapers and tenements, as well as back alleyways, add to the story's development. Dos Passos has captured the obnoxiousness and gaudiness of New York City's sleazy underbelly. Rather of focusing on others, the characters' major concern is themselves and their lack of regard for others' well-being. A lusty, avaricious, hypocritical, intellectually stupid and self-aggrandizing group of people. According to Lanny Ace Thomson (1979), "the product is not controlled by the workers, but by the capitalists" in a capitalist society. In the end, (Thomson 26),.

4. APPROACHING CRITICISM

Jean-Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and novelist, declared John Dos Passos "the finest writer of our time" after reading a 1938 French version of 1919. Although Sartre's support may have been self-serving, Harry Levin commented in "Revisiting Dos Passos' U.S.A." that the pronouncement "fitting in especially well with Sartre's existentialist perspective" (401). There is no denying the fact that John Dos Passos was a modernist author of his day, regardless of how you slice it. It is typical of modernists to be highly lauded Harvard graduates, bilingual, global travelers, a former war-time Red Cross ambulance driver, and an early twentieth-century literary personality. Similarities may be seen between the author and many of his modernist colleagues, all of whom were experimenting with new forms of writing in the face of new ideas about the human psyche in the face of a booming century. Dos Passos' 1919, which undoubtedly represents the height of the author's creative career in radical and modernist experimentation, is not diminished by interpretations like Sartre's, which do not distract from the worth and critique of the work itself. It is important to note that Sartre's assessment on Dos Passos'

literary method to create a unique narrative of America from the standpoint of history implies an underlying historical awareness in this study.

His literary talents have been eclipsed by the criticism surrounding Dos Passos' personal life. For example, Barbara Foley has argued that "Dos Passos adhered to a class-based understanding of social struggle in U.S.A." because of his political affiliation at the time and established a narrative process that was fundamentally dialectical and materialist" (*Radical Representations* 426). If you are looking for a way to see the United States of America through the eyes of Dos Passos, you are going to find that critics have largely interpreted the novel as a socialist text that focuses on "the devastating effects of capitalistic greed," says Janet Galligani Casey, "Dos Passos scholars." (250). Melvin Landsberg's biography of Dos Passos clearly states the point: "U.S.A. is not the product of a proletariat, but of a Harvard-educated middleclass radical versed with various nations, dialects, and literary traditions" (188). For critique, Marxism's political presence is clear, particularly when the book deals with an era of industrial transformation and class warfare.. A Marxist or proletariat view of "Dos Passos' theory of historical conflict is formed by Marxist [or proletarian] class struggle" appears to limit the extent of the United States (and Dos Passos) (Foley 425). Other reviewers argue that the novel's aesthetic merits reflect modernist themes of literary experimentation rather than a Marxist perspective. As a novelist, Mason Wade claims that "in Dos Passos' case the [Marxian] revolt has been intensified because he has lived in the most dollar-dominated era of our nation's history," which Wade further claims that Dos Passos 3 "has not allowed his Marxian beliefs to dominate his sensibilities [...] to overcome the integrity as an artist" (367). As both sides have pointed out, the founding of the United States is neither purely political nor purely aesthetic. A conclusion may be drawn based on the varying critique of Dos Passos' U.S.A. trilogy that there is still a lot to learn from it.

Since many other modernist authors were also trying to represent a changing society in a new century, I suggest that Dos Passos may be read within the framework of a certain social and cultural time period as well. Dos Passos, in his own words, "intended to write objectively" ("*Contemporary Chronicles*" 239), which leads me to believe that it is important to reexamine the format he used. A writer, by definition, is "not to make themselves figureheads in political battles." However, the writer's role is distinct from the role of the citizen, and the final goal may be the same, even if the two roles are distinct at the same time. (171) "*The Writer as Technician*" (paraphrasing). For Dos Passos, writing is about "the humanities, with language of all the men of your tongue" of your generation and their traditions and "their sentiments and perspectives" (171). In a certain era, the focus on language is crucial. As a result, Dos Passos' writing style may be more closely tied to the author's own life experiences, which reflect a strong interest in documenting history. The United States of America is a humanities modernist experiment in the relationship between subjects (individuals) and objects (empirical reality). As a result, for Dos Passos, language is a way of remembering the past. To put it another way, it may be seen as a product of the previous. Language binds together a diverse range of experiences to form a coherent picture of the past. Experimentation in narrative form is a modernist theme that permeates Dos Passos' work, which aims to expose the modalities that impact the idea of documenting history.

5. CONCLUSION

Because of his commitment to a distinct cause, which required him to reject tremendous political and personal pressures, he has been subjected to some fairly questionable psychiatric interpretation. Daniel Aaron points out that critics have observed Dos Passos's work in *Writers on the Left* "adolescent frustrations and latent hatred to his father shown in his recurrent rebellion, his steadfast quest for a fulfilling religion, and his tenacious libertarianism. In any event, it is apparent that Dos Passos never found any type of collectivism to his liking, as several of his contemporaries did in the 1930s." Reductive psychological explanations for Dos Passos's aesthetics and politics suggest that his authoritative role has strongly influenced not only his own orientation toward his work and his political choices, but also his reception by a reading audience that continues to regard him as a politically symbolic figure. Perhaps our current critical assessments, still influenced by the left's lingering feeling of betrayal and Cold War preconceptions, should be examined further if this is really the case? Is it worthwhile to inquire, as Michael Denning writes, "after the 1940s, no one disputed about Passos?" in the modern spirit of critical re-examination? For a readership craving a personal connection to the author and expecting heroic literary figures, maybe Dos Passos's transformations in 1917 and 1937 would be less disturbing.

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