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The Narrative of Revolution: Socialism and *The Masses* 1911-1917

By

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Introduction

This thesis seeks to situate *The Masses* magazine (1911-1917) within a specific discursive tradition of revolution, revealing a narrative pattern that is linked with discourse that began to emerge during and after the French Revolution. As the term “socialism” begins to resonate again within popular American political discourse (and as a potentially viable course of action rather than a curse for damnable offense), it is worthwhile to trace its significance within American history to better understand its aesthetic dimensions, its radical difference, and its way of devising problems and answers. In short, my thesis poses the question: what ideological structures does *The Masses* present as an alternative to its constructed Other, capitalism? To be clear, I want to acknowledge that often when the signifier of “socialism” is utilized, it does not necessarily connote a specific agenda. There were many divergent wings and platforms within the socialist groups operating in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from evolutionary socialists, anarchists, to syndicalists, etc. Rather than assuming that various socialist groups extant at this time shared similar political goals, we should view the word “socialist” as an attempt to iterate difference and resistance to the “capitalist” status quo: a way of narrating reality that seeks to open new modes of consciousness, and furthermore, that around this sign of difference, certain discursive narrative structures were indeed shared. Whatever their internal differences, early twentieth-century “socialists” shared a construct of time that viewed the inevitability of “redemption” for the fallen capitalist world into socialist paradise, itself a discourse of history, time, and subjectivity. While by no means the sole platform for socialist discourse in the early twentieth century, *The Masses* occupied a peculiar

role in the amorphous movement since it did not dogmatically ascribe to a specific mode of action to achieve revolution. Instead, its emphasis was on the creation of a class consciousness through the production of art, fiction, critique, and journalism, all of which reflected socialist ideology. An editorial notice posted in December 1912 after Max Eastman took over as lead editor read:

We do not enter the field of any Socialist or other magazine now published, or to be published. We shall have no further part in the factional disputes within the Socialist Party [sic]; we are opposed to the dogmatic spirit which creates and sustains these disputes. Our appeal will be to the masses, both Socialist and non-Socialist, with entertainment, education, and the livelier kinds of propaganda.

(“Editorial Notice” 3)¹

Note that the editors position the magazine as a neutral or mediating influence within the party (though it would be generous to describe the movement under such unified terms), decrying “the dogmatic spirit” that divided the various socialist groups and organizations. Their intent was a direct “appeal to the masses, both Socialist and non-Socialist,” to “entertain” and “educate” with propaganda. In short, they intended to proselytize and convert the general public with an alternative form of ideological media that was both entertaining and educational. For our purposes, this means that in general, the magazine was more concerned with cultivating a sense of narrative mythos (ideological story) within the subject rather than a sense of political praxis. *The Masses* thus provides us with a fertile ground upon which to isolate metanarratives that sustained socialist ideological discourse—its structure, logic, view of history and the subject—

¹ Unless otherwise noted, I have retrieved all quotations of *The Masses* online from The Modernist Journals Project (modjourn.org), a joint project of Brown University and The University of Tulsa. The digital collection is extensive, comprising a plethora of little magazines from the turn of the century to 1920. A highly recommended resource.

since its main concern was inculcating just such discourse within the general public. In short, *The Masses* wanted to instill the sense of a new world ushered in by the coming of inevitable revolution, the epochal change that required individuals to fundamentally alter their subjective experience of the world. This secular conversion was a necessary precondition before any such political action could take place.

Much of the inspiration for this project has come from the work of David Scott and his analysis of historical narrative in *Conscripts of Modernity*. Focusing on C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, Scott's work demonstrates the ways in which anticolonialism (another discourse of revolutionary promise) has "emplotted" its narrative of history and time in fashion similar to that of the archetypal romance:

Anticolonial stories about past, present, and future have typically been emplotted in a distinctive narrative form, one with a distinctive story-potential: that of *Romance*. They have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication; that have tended to enact a distinctive rhythm and pacing, a distinctive direction, and to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have usually depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving. (Scott 8)

Scott's characterization of anticolonial narrative very much resembles and echoes that of early twentieth-century socialist revolutionaries. Fundamental to the ideological framework of the socialist ideology disseminated in *The Masses* was a shared narrative arc. Humanity was to be vindicated from its present fallenness in the industrial capitalist nightmare by the vanquishing of the owners of capital and the transportation into socialist utopia. The promise of this utopian recovery was pivotal to the sustained vision of the eclectic movement, providing the gravitational

axis around which all other propositions rotated. Justice, equality, freedom: these were among many of the promised rewards beyond the event horizon of the revolution. Yet grounding them all was a notion of wholeness and completeness, the promise of fulfillment in an idealized “afterworld” not at all dissimilar from that of Christian heaven, as we shall see. Much of my desire to investigate this particular epoch (1911-1917) through the lens of *The Masses* is to gain peripherally better insight into the ideological discourse of our own time, especially with the passive and tentative reemergence of the word socialism in the current American political sphere. Its reemergence into popular discourse as more than a bugaboo demands that its historical roots be readdressed, especially since candidates who describe themselves as democratic socialists (most notably Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) have begun to attract voters and reshape contemporary political discourse. As socialism is being proposed as a “new” way of organizing society and ameliorating its injustices, it seems pertinent to interrogate its potentially problematic ideological pitfalls. As Scott remarks about anticolonialism, “in the wake of the global historical-political and cognitive shifts that have taken place in the past decade or two, I have doubt about the continued critical salience of this narrative form and its underlying mythos” (Scott 8). The problems and answers the contributors to *The Masses* saw in their society cannot be the same within our context in a dramatically different world. Yet at the same time, it is worthwhile also to collect those novel perspectives the magazine and its community attempted to forge at the apex of Victorian social conservatism. We need to become inspired by the desire to see the world differently, reassess value, connection, subjectivity, to question and resist those problematic and perhaps unseen cultural assumptions that have become internalized as fact in the triumph of the neoliberalist American global order.

***The Masses'* Historical Context**

There was no better environment for the flourishing of such a radical little magazine than New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century.² The years in which *The Masses* operated (1911-1917) saw not only the peak of the second industrial revolution and its diasporic reorganization of peoples, but also an ascendant political radicalism. The convergence of these three historical forces was especially impactful in New York City—and nowhere more so than in the Greenwich Village: one of the city's oldest neighborhoods that had preserved a peculiar geographic and idiosyncratic identity separate from the compact industry, tenements, and grid-patterned avenues that characterized the rest of the turbulent city. Its quaint difference made it an ideal and fertile playground for disaffected American youth seeking refuge from the conservatism of high Victorian society. Prominent American intellectuals, including Edgar Allan Poe, Edith Wharton, Walt Whitman, Henry James, and Mark Twain (and one is tempted not to neglect, given his political importance, Thomas Paine, who spent his last years on Grove Street a century earlier), had already laid the groundwork, establishing the neighborhood as an artist's haven. These youths at the turn of the century hoped to find shelter in the urban reef so that they might cultivate new modes of culture and begin a progressive transformation of society increasingly scarred by industrialization. Washington Square, in the heart of "The Village," was perfectly emblematic of the woes that were rending society. On the northern side of the park loomed the stately and impressive homes of the nouveau American aristocracy (known to this

² Defined by Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam Mckible as "non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing the experimental works or radical opinions of untried, unpopular, or underrepresented writers [and artists]. Defying mainstream tastes and conventions, some little magazines aim to uphold higher artistic and intellectual standards than their commercial counterparts, while others seek to challenge conventional political wisdom and practice (Churchill and Mckible 6).

day as “the Row”) while only a minute’s walk across the park to south were immigrant tenement blocks punctuated by factories. The stresses and strains of modernity were perhaps nowhere as evident as in New York City where the wealthiest social castes lived in close-proximity with the most destitute, splendidly displaying the contrast of disparity in plain view. The conflict between classes, labor and capital, was on full display on the daily and in the streets. In the period from roughly the 1860s to the 1920s, unionization across the country ramped up in tandem with second-wave industrialization and the armed conflicts—The Civil War and World War One—that required the mobilization of large labor forces to produce weapons and goods. Protest, organization, and clashes defined New York City especially. The first Labor Day Parade in America occurred in Union Square in 1882 with nearly 25,000 workers seeking the legal guarantee of an eight-hour work day and the abolition of child labor. In 1911, garment laborers (most of them women) of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory one block east of Washington Square went on strike, demanding better working conditions. They were met by hired ruffians and police brutality. Only a few months later, the factory went up in flames, killing 146 garment laborers (again, most of them women), most jumping to their deaths. American society was undergoing seismic changes at a rapid pace, and those changes were bringing conflict on a wide scale. Public opinion had yet soured on the word “socialism,” which was offered by some as a potential course correction. It was a “time of significant unionization and labor agitation and in a period when the Socialist party recorded impressive and encouraging electoral gains” (Fishbein 3). By no means a new ideology, socialism had nonetheless gained increasing traction on the stage of political discourse during the late nineteenth and especially the early twentieth century. This receptivity to “new” ideological platforms created the potential for radical magazines like *The Masses*. As Fishbein further suggests, “the first two decades of [the twentieth] century witnessed in America

the rise of many little magazines that accepted contributions from socialists and the production of several explicitly socialist novels a year. It was this quickening of literary activity that provided a context for the rise and fall of *The Masses*” (Fishbein 15)

While the turmoil of modernization opened niches for ideological radicalization, it also provided the means by which such radicalization could propagate and proliferate. Seemingly quotidian technological developments like the typewriter helped convert the raw energy of thought into collective discourse, as “new print technologies enabled faster typesetting (‘the linotype abridges four hours’ toil to one’) and cheaper machinery... [such that] by the mid-teens, the correspondence of many modernist writers and editors is typewritten, indicating the widespread availability and affordability of the machines. New technologies thus helped drive the Little Renaissance at least as much as the combustion of individual genius” (Churchill and McKible 11). The wide and cheap availability of printing and typing technologies thus transferred the power of consumable media from big business to independent publications working on a small scale, widening the scope of potential audiences for otherwise divergent views, “*The Masses* was the product of a revolt against the genteel tradition and against commercial control of publishing. It benefited from a flurry of new interest in socialism and from a proliferation of alternatives to the established press; by the early twentieth century a small, increasingly sophisticated audience existed for experimental socialist publications” (Fishbein 15). It was under these conditions, the increasing free flow of discourse that modernism began to accelerate in a dialogic fashion: a series of conversations coming from an increasing and more frequent variety of media and locations.

The Masses came about in an age of revolutionary innocence, as Irving Howe describe in his introduction to *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses 1911-1917*, “for behind them still throbbed the

tradition of nineteenth-century American radicalism, the unambiguous nay-saying of Thoreau and the Abolitionists. This tradition implied that the individual person was still able to square off against the authority of the state” (Howe 7). The original founder of the magazine in 1911 was Piet Vlag, a Dutch immigrant interested in the flourishing of a cooperative movement (he himself had begun a doomed cooperative store). The historical record does not treat Vlag’s tenure kindly (perhaps an unfair assessment since under his watch many prominent figures contributed, including Tolstoy and Eugene Debs), and indeed, already by late 1912 the magazine seemed to be withering into obscurity. When a prominent financial backer withdrew his support, Vlag himself decided to resign and move to Florida. However, while he had seemingly failed in his mission to foster a co-operative movement, he had gathered a talented group of artists and writers under his wing. They were not willing to give up so easily, and in September of 1912, John and Dolly Sloan, Louis Untermeyer, Eugene Wood, Maurice Becker, Glenn Coleman, William Washburn Nutting, H.J. Turner, Charles and Alice Winter, and Art Young regrouped and decided to elect Max Eastman as their lead editor. Eastman was charming and intellectually respected, having completed all prerequisites for a Ph.D. at Columbia (save the submission fee for his dissertation). While the initial editorial structure of the magazine was to be maintained—weekly cooperative meetings of the “editors” in which they would vote on the material to be issued—Eastman quickly became the driving authority behind the magazine as his bohemian compatriots seemed less inclined to shoulder any burden beyond the rambunctious late-night editorial free-for-alls. Beyond managing the logistical and administrative nightmare that actually producing a monthly periodical requires, Eastman was also adept, crucially if ironically, at raising money from wealthy liberal patrons. Inevitably, it was Eastman’s voice that would sound loudest in the later years of *The Masses*, his idealism and revolutionary vision that would color

its own. Nonetheless, the magazine proved an open platform receiving a wide array of influential contributors, from Ashcan artists (notably John Sloan, George Bellows, and Art Young), Pablo Picasso, Leo Tolstoy, Sherwood Anderson, Floyd Dell, Debs, Emma Goldman, Louise Bryant, John Reed, Sarah N. Cleghorn, Amy Lowell, Margaret Sanger, Dorothy Day, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Carl Sandburg, and Upton Sinclair, among others.

The peculiar discourse of *The Masses* was an intersection of American Romanticism and Marxism. Its revolutionary discourse can be traced back to The French Revolution as the potential for radical change—changing the structural relations of the cultural-social system—was newly conceptualized in its linear narrative, standing in stark contrast to premodern notions of circular and recurrent time. One might argue that in many ways the revolutionary appeal of socialism in the early twentieth century in America marks the apex and end of that discursive epoch. As the potential for socialist formation ratcheted up, strong resistance likewise mobilized. Both the first World War and the attendant Russian Revolution mark a blunt and disabusing bookend to utopian idealism, squashing the American revolutionary imagination. As Howe further remarks about *The Masses*, “it was a brief joining of political and cultural energies, and in few years it would come to an end...as our dominant politics slid into devious Wilsonian idealism, and as our radicalism took a disastrous plunge into a peculiarly sterile form of communism, the spirit of *The Masses* would be dead” (Howe 5). *The Masses* was inevitably crushed by a series of lawsuits, first against big business media (most notably A.P.), then eventually the federal government itself newly empowered by the espionage act with the outbreak of the War.

However, between the turn of the century and the First Red Scare, socialism had yet to be propagandized by the Right into the universal boogeyman. It retained its freshness in the

American imagination as a new and potentially viable means of social organization to not only alleviate the woes of the Second Industrial Revolution, but also to create an intellectual space in which to expand the dimensions of individual potential. For the Village radicals in particular, they saw no tension between a class levelled society and the preservation of individuality, on the contrary, in revolution they saw the opportunity for completely supplanting the old, genteel conservative values with ‘modern’ sensibilities concerning identity. While *Vlag*’s editorship seems to be almost universally criticized, under Eastman the magazine started to take form as a powerful weapon of propaganda. From 1913 to 1917 it took shape as a rigidly antidogmatic, fiercely individualistic, and most importantly, *revolutionary* publication. The magazine printed the following masthead on all subsequent issues after it was cobbled together last minute by John Reed and Max Eastman in January 1913:

A revolutionary and not a reform magazine; a magazine with no dividends to pay; a free magazine; frank, arrogant, impertinent, searching for the true causes; a magazine directed against rigidity and dogma wherever it is found; printing what is too naked or true for a moneymaking press; a magazine whose final policy is to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody, not even its readers—there is room for this publication in America. (Editorial Note 29)

The distinction between revolution and reform is perhaps the most important component of the statement, so I would like to return to it last. First let us note the ways in which the masthead establishes itself as a fiercely antidogmatic and individualistic platform. As it states, it is “a magazine directed against rigidity and dogma.” This was more directed towards the inter-factional squabbling of the amorphous socialist movement than it was for conservative America. Eastman was especially insistent that the form of the movement was not necessarily important,

and that a rigid ascription to a singular platform of action—anarchist, syndicalist, direct versus political action, etc.—would only distract socialists in general from their ultimate goal. The most important function of *The Masses* (as Eastman saw it) was the creation of class awareness and consciousness, the blueprint for a new culture which was a prerequisite for revolutionary activity. It further established itself as an engine of this consciousness by directly contrasting itself with the capitalist media, “printing what is too naked or true for a moneymaking press,” eschewing a profit-driven model, selecting whatever art, fiction, or social critique suited its radical imagination no matter how offensive to Victorian sensibilities. It would be a proponent of feminism, civil liberties, sexual liberation, contraception (Margret Sanger was a contributor), anti-militarism, secularism, all issues which were contemporaneously highly inflammatory and controversial.³ Forming a class consciousness did not mean sacrificing individuality. On the contrary, for the *Masses* editorial board, preserving, defending, and cultivating an individual’s unique sense of identity was crucial to the fruition of the socialist cause. As the masthead proclaims, it is “frank, arrogant, impertinent[.]...a magazine whose final policy is to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody, not even its readers.” It insisted on the individual’s right to free speech (especially with regards to critiquing authority), creative independence, and self-determination. In many ways the bohemian culture of *The Village* as exemplified by *The Masses* was a continuation of the American Romantic tradition established by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, and Walt Whitman (who himself was a prominent figure in *The Village* at the end of the nineteenth century, sometimes depicted as a founding

³ To be clear, from a twenty-first century perspective, the magazine’s radical identity politics can seem highly reductive and offensive, if well-intentioned. While the magazine did advocate for universal suffrage and rights, its depictions of people of color can often seem outright bigoted, utilizing caricature in art and stylized dialect in text. Furthermore, the notion of sexual liberation was extremely limited, neglecting the nuance and consequences of interpersonal intimacy, implicitly privileging the masculine subject in a sexual relationship, needless to say, with almost no discussion of gender or sexuality beyond heterosexuality.

figure of the bohemian era). While some scholars have suggested a potential philosophical clash in the conflict between individuality and class-formation, it is important to keep in mind that for *The Masses*, this was not an issue; socialist revolution offered not only a way to create a better future but to break with the stultifying social mores of the past. This last point is perhaps why Eastman and his compatriots were so insistent that it be “a revolutionary and not a reform magazine.” As Raymond Williams has suggested, the distinction between terms has a long and meaningful etymological import:

It was in this state of interaction between the words [“rebellion” and “revolution” in the aftermath of The Glorious Revolution (1688)] that the specific effects of the French Revolution made the modern sense of revolution decisive. The older sense of a restoration of lawful authority, though used in occasional justifications, was overridden by the sense of **necessary innovation of a new order, supported by the increasingly positive sense of progress**. Of course the sense of achievement of the original rights of man [French National Assembly 1789] was also relevant. This sense of making a new *human* order was always as important as that of overthrowing an old order [bold mine, italics author]. (Williams 273)

The transition between the early modern and the modern period thus saw a philosophical reformulation of the narrative of time and a change from circularity in which revolution connoted a return, to linearity in which it signified “innovation of a new order, supported by the increasingly positive sense of progress.” Progress was as much a function of creating a “new human order” as it was “overthrowing an old order.” It is within this discursive tradition that *The Masses* must be located as an inheritor of centuries-old debates about the nature of time and change. The sense of progress as a break with the past and the creation of new formations of

humanity helps elucidate why it was that *The Masses* could be both individualist and collectivist. The socialist revolution held not only the promise of ameliorating society's ills but was an unformed *tabula rasa* into which they could pour their desire for self-determination. In effect, it was an idealized atemporal space into which all their fantasies, no matter how incongruent, could all be fulfilled. However, as we shall see, this wish to fulfill both the self and society into a perfect union was not without its precedents: In adopting a discourse of revolutionary change, they inherited the internalized ideological structures of their forbears, not just of the Romantics, but also of Christian theologians.

Narrative and Revolution

Identity—one's construction of the self, its "inner" content and its "outer" social coordinates, its place and relationship to historical time—is projected in language as a series of stories linked together chronologically. In short, narrative is the primary linguistic structure through which we locate and identify ourselves in the "real" world. As Hayden White adumbrates in *The Content of Form*, "narrative is revealed to be a particularly effective system of discursive meaning production by which individuals can be taught to live in a distinctively 'imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence,' that is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects" (White x). The ways in which one "emplots" (to borrow White's term) oneself within history depends upon their ideological model of the world and its trajectory. Ideology can thus be understood as an inherited set of discursive fields that assemble a logical narrative of the "real," or as Fredric Jameson defines it, "a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to

transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History” (Jameson 30). Every ideology has its own peculiar form, narrating the subject and its world along the lines of an intelligible plot. Needless to say, as much as an ideology produces its world, it also necessarily traces boundaries. The formal limits of an ideology devise specific contours for a model of the real. Only certain “logical” conclusions about the way the world works can arise in this environmental form, allowing only certain problems, question, and answers to be posed as its content.

Along these methodological lines, I would like to suggest that *The Masses* was indeed an inheritor of an ideological discourse that well preceded it: Christian teleology. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams has convincingly demonstrated the ways in which the Romantic discourse of the nineteenth century repurposed the formal narrative structures of Christianity, leading to “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking” (Abrams 12). Responding to the turbulent events of the French Revolution which fundamentally reshaped the ideological and political map of the world, Romanticism grappled with creating a new discursive space in which to make sense of the dizzying pace of change and upheaval. Yet in the process, the old semiotics of form was not abandoned for novelty but rather repurposed for the exigencies of the moment: “Secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of the centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of their inheritance of classical and pagan thought. The process...has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises” (Abrams 13). These religious ideas have traveled through discursive space and time not so much in dogmatic principle as in their formal story structure, prescribing certain ways of delineating the trajectory of history, the subject’s

emplotment in that history, and the subsequent exegesis of the relationship of the two as a concise whole and intelligible process. Its narrative arc is familiar enough and can be identified in a wide array of media, from classic medieval romances to its modern iteration in contemporary romantic comedies:

The pervasive and persisting expectation that history will end once and for all in a new heaven and new earth is unique to Judeo-Christian civilization, and it has had a powerful and irremissive effect in forming secular as well as religious thinking...the Biblical text denounced the present state of the world as relievedly evil and promised God's early intervention to annihilate all existing states and institutions in order to set up His kingdom, not in heaven, but on earth; and this constituted a patent menace to the status quo. (Abrams 57)

Christian teleology posits a linear story of history, with an Ideal prehistory, a fallen "real world" in the present, and an inevitable synthesis of the two as heaven on earth. As Abrams claims, this is possibly a narrative structure that is unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Historical models of antiquity tended to emphasize the circular, rather than linear, progression of time. Phenomena repeat cyclically as reiterations of themselves *ad infinitum*. History was understood to be indefinite and permanent from the moment of creation into the infinite space of the future. Not so with the Christian linear teleology which posited a beginning, middle, and definite end. These three distinct temporal epochs furthermore have distinct valences: notably, the perfection of the "absolute past," the "fallenness" of the corrupted present material world, and their reunification through a synthesis of the perfect (or ideal) and material (or real) worlds in an apocalyptic end.⁴

⁴ In "Epic and The Novel," M.M. Bahktin posits this "absolute time" as generically distinctive of the epic in antiquity: "whatever its origins, the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is the transference of the world it describes to an *absolute past* of national beginnings

The material world is by nature malformed and problematic and requires the amelioration of apocalyptic (read: revolutionary) transformation into utopian space that exists in exteriority beyond history.⁵ The parallels between Christian narrative and socialist revolutionary discourse can be easily understood, from this historical perspective, as a mutational inheritance, a re-inscription of structural forms to accommodate newly emergent phenomena. Rather than locating the driving force of history in God's will, dialectical materialism locates it in the forces of the material world: the inevitable clash of classes and the levelling of all structures into paradisiacal reunion.

Such teleological idealism carries with it certain structural hermeneutics. If history is indeed moving towards its telos, then all historical events and subjects in some way represent a part of the greater whole. As Jameson points out with regards to Christian teleology, the Old Testament is "taken as historical fact. At the same time, its availability as a system of figures, above and beyond this literal historical reference, is grounded in the conception of history itself as God's book, which one may study and gloss for signs and traces of the prophetic message the Author is supposed to have inscribed within it" (Jameson 29). Every event, person, material circumstance, is thus implicated in the processes of the telos, a metonymic representation of the abstracted ideal. Everything that is intelligible necessarily passes through the idealized superstructure and is a function of it. I emphasize this last point because it is crucial to understanding not only the ideological narrative structure that occurs in *The Masses* with regards to historicity, but because it is further illuminates the positionality of the subject as an agent of

and peak times. The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, 'beginning,' 'first,' 'founder,' 'ancestor,' that which occurred earlier,' and so forth are not merely temporal categories, but valorized temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree...The epic absolute past is the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times as well" (Bahktin 15).

⁵ We should recall that the Greek etymology of the word utopia literally means "not place," a place that does not exist here and now.

that history. As will become evident in our analysis of some of the first editorials, the individual subject plays an important role in the revelation of revolution, again, a repurposing of Romantic thought. Romantic artists and thinkers “represented themselves in the traditional persona of the philosopher-seer or the poet-prophet...they set out, in various yet recognizably parallel ways, to reconstitute the grounds of hope and to announce the certainty...of a rebirth in which a renewed mankind will inhabit a renovated earth where he will find himself thoroughly at home” (Abrams 12). As with their Romantic forbearers, the editors of *The Masses* saw art and philosophy as modes of exegetical interpretation, as Thomas A. Maik extrapolates, Eastman thought that “through literature and drawings, the writers and artists brought their readers a heightened awareness of life. Through the new awareness of life, they recognized the issues of life. Through both the awareness of life and recognition of issues in life, they desired to improve it” (Maik 77). Artistic expression was a process of exegesis by which one “read” the book of life, and for the contributors of *The Masses*, the conclusions to be harvested from true artistic endeavor could only naturally lead to the messianic telos of socialism.

The Masses was a medium devised specifically to catalyze the progress of the messianic socialist telos through its deployment of all artistic forms and journalism. The very first editorial of the magazine makes this abundantly clear:

A new Socialist [sic] magazine requires no apology for its appearance. The hollow pretense of fulfilling a much-felt want with which every capitalist periodical enters the field is in the case of Socialist publications a genuine reality. The Socialist movement is a growing movement and *naturally creates a growing literature. As the sphere of its activity extends and its means of propaganda*

increase and diverge, it automatically evolves new organs of expression. (Seltzer 1, emphasis added)

There are two salient points to be drawn from the above. First, the magazine positions itself as the anthesis to its Other, “capitalist periodicals,” suggesting that its emergence fulfills a “much-felt want” in contrast to the superfluous commercialism of profit-driven media. It claims to be responding to an organic and unfulfilled need in the reading public. Second, it situates the need for its emergence within a narrative of evolutionary process of becoming. It is a “new organ of expression” that has “automatically evolved” as a function of this process, an agent of a historical movement. Yet *The Masses* never explicitly promulgated a specific program for achieving its socialist ends. In turn, it was as likely to publish materials from any number of wings of the American movement as it was to lampoon them; anarchism, syndicalism, any and every rigid dogmatic perspective was denied for its rigidity. Its main goal was to produce a textual and artistic space that could serve to produce and enhance the ideological discursive field; it intended to expose the uninitiated to a radical aesthetic, and thus forge a new “space of consciousness,” so to speak. It planned to do this by presenting a platform with a diverse array of media, from journalism, to political commentary, fiction, poetry, and perhaps most famously, art.⁶

The urge to iterate the inevitability of socialist teleology was more frequent during the initial years of publication under the editorial direction of Piet Vlag from 1911 to 1913 than it was under Max Eastman’s direction, which tended more towards social and political

⁶ Most famously *The Masses* favored artists of the New York based Ashcan School, an unsurprising proclivity since John Sloan, considered one of the movement’s founders, served as the magazine’s editor.

commentary. An editorial from the April, 1911 issue entitled “Ignorance of Socialism” proclaims such inevitability:

Perhaps the most remarkable fact in the life of contemporary society is the still general though gradually decreasing ignorance concerning Socialism [sic], especially in our country. Here is the grandest movement that the world has ever seen, a movement that has made its way in every civilized country. Wherever capitalism has appeared, Socialism has followed in its wake. Its growth is steady and certain. It moves forward with the relentless inevitability of fate. It counts millions of followers throughout the world, to whom Socialism is their sole hope, their religion, and their science. (“Ignorance of Socialism” 3)

Notice the arc of the story presented in the editorial’s first lines. The emerging knowledge of socialism as “the grandest movement that the world has ever known,” rising as a natural effect: “wherever capitalism has appeared, Socialism has followed in its wake.” It implies a causal relationship in a series of logical movements, “its growth is steady and certain. It moves forward with the relentless inevitability of fate,” statements that echo the narrative cue of the impending apocalyptic utopian return. The overall picture constructs a vision of history in teleological process, with socialism as its source of momentum as a sort of prime mover, combining at once “hope...religion...science,” that which causes humanity to act (hope) and make intelligible the ideal (religion) and real (science) world. The unnamed editor even links this process to a series of revolutionary evolutions extending back into the ancient past: “why should we wonder that the imperial Romans failed so utterly to understand the early Christian movement?” What wonder that the great and wise historian, Tacitus, felt he could dismiss in a few lines of stupid drivel this movement, which a century later was to conquer the world?” (“Ignorance of Socialism” 3).

Christianity is thus described in a similar process of becoming, from ignorance to total civilizational envelopment. Such an allegorical comparison, if not subtly mapping out a teleology of evolutionary phases, nonetheless understands history as series of inevitable metamorphoses moving progressively upward. The point is easy to miss here, but I want to emphasize this “progressive process-oriented” narrative history when it can be so easy to forget that a hypothetical non-teleological ideological history might not view change as inevitable or coded in positive or negative valence. That one epoch or time would be markedly better is a moral judgement that needs a structural system of belief to give value to such judgements. As Abrams suggests, “the course of history provides no valid grounds for large-scale certainty about the future” (Abrams 63), a fact which will become abundantly clear to eager socialists in America as they witness the First World War unfold and the “fruition” of a socialist regime in Stalin’s Soviet Union. Abrams continues, “The doctrine of absolute revolution has not an empirical but, ultimately, a theological basis; its certainty is a faith in Providence—a Providence converted into its secular equivalent of an immanent teleology, or dialectical necessity, or the scientific laws compelling historical events...its roots, that is to say, are in the Biblical scheme of apocalyptic history” (Abrams 63).

Indeed, this sort of ideological attitude is even encouraged by the author of “Ignorance of Socialism,” when he writes of those who have come to the one true knowledge of socialism and its transformative effect: “they too, may learn and feel that inward thrill which comes to every Socialist when he realizes the great destiny of mankind. They may give significance to their every act. They may lead a larger life” (“Ignorance of Socialism” 3). More than a mere political program, socialism is here endowed with spiritually transformative power. It incorporates one into the totality of the whole, bestowing the exegetical power to read the signs which the book of

life transmits, “they may give significance to their every act,” that signal revelation and communion, connecting one to an abstract force which unifies mind and matter, “they may transform themselves, as millions of Socialists have...into truly useful citizens, whose pulses beat in unison with the new social life to be inaugurated by the Socialist era” (“Ignorance of Socialism” 3). The parallels with apocalyptic rhetoric culminate on the last line: “they may join that army of increasing millions who march steadily onward to *the great goal, the next stage in human evolution—Socialism*” (“Ignorance of Socialism 3, emphasis added). Here it is made abundantly clear that Socialism is not a choice or option for political action and organization, but an unavoidable effect of progressive evolutionary teleology; however, it is not a process that exteriorizes the subject, but deeply implicates and is nourished by the subject’s participation in its awakening.⁷

M.H. Abram’s “natural supernaturalism,” “the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking,” strikes poignantly on this last point. As he notes of religious philosophy internalized and appropriated by the Romantics:

A more important and dramatic phenomenon was the tendency, grounded in texts of the New Testament itself, to internalize apocalypse by transferring the theater of events from the outer earth and heaven to the spirit of a single believer, in which there enacts itself, metaphorically, the entire eschatological drama of the

⁷ I feel the need here to address an important issue regarding the relationship between *evolutionary and revolutionary socialism*. Raymond Williams draws an important distinction in *Keywords*, “The sense of revolution as bringing about a wholly new social order was greatly strengthened by the socialist movement, and this led to some complexity in the distinction between revolutionary and evolutionary socialism. From one point of view the distinction was between violent overthrow of the old order and peaceful and constitutional change” (Williams 273). Williams’ seems to suggest that evolutionism in the early twentieth in some part took the shape of reformism, a political action method aimed at modifying rather than tearing down the extant system in revolution. In my reading and analysis, I have generally focused on socialist text from *The Masses* which seem to have incorporated evolution as scientific justification for revolution. The term, usually a maladjusted simulacrum of Darwin’s theory, seems to be much bandied about at the turn and early portion of the century.

destruction of the old creation, the union with Christ, and the emergence of a new creation—not *illud tempus* but here and now, in this life. (Abrams 47)

As Abrams argues, art for the Romantics was a way of exploring the internal turmoil between light and dark and struggle to reach ideal perfection. The power of the imagination—the power of the human mind—had the capacity to go beyond the realm of the possible and transport one, “as the poet moves through the region of the mind, beauty (in a Biblical phrase) ‘pitches her tents’ hourly before him. All points toward the ‘blissful hour’ which is Wordsworth’s version of the holy marriage at the end of time” (Abrams 56). The earthly paradise was, however, not to be assumed in post-temporal afterlife but was to be enacted in the here and now. For Wordsworth, the event “is transported from the indefinite future to the experiential present and translated from external intervention to an act of unaided vision in which the Lamb and the New Jerusalem are replaced by man’s mind as the bridegroom and nature as the bride” (Abrams 56). Religious revelation was secularized to affect the events of the real world. The imagination of the poet offered the tools with which to envision a new connection—to both humanity and nature—and make an ideal world real on this earth.

In theory, *The Masses* was the perfect vessel for the transformation of the world through art. What better way to effect change than to mobilize all print artforms onto a singular platform and propagandize that which the artist had to offer. For Eastman, this was certainly the case. “His goal—merging the world of imagination with the world of reality—was near, and the instrument for its fulfillment would be *The Masses*” (Maik 72). In *The Enjoyment of Poetry* (1913), Eastman wrote that there is a value “in poetry that goes beyond the present. There is a value toward a goal not yet attained. Even the mere realization of autumn in its absence...looks somewhat to a future end...It is not only an imagination, but a preperception, and its value

culminates in the more full experience” (Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Poetry* 196). The artistic object and act literally realize the idealized object, transferring the inner imaginative desire onto the real world: “thus the poetry of words may be regarded as a means toward the poetry of life. It is to that end practical” (Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Poetry* 196). This is a classic notion of *poesis*, a quasi-spiritual belief in the power of poetry (Art) to “make,” endowing the individual subject with the creative power of the divine *logos*. “[Poetry] nourishes the waking spirit, nourishes the gift of vision, and the tendency to issue from the bondages of habit and receive the world” (Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Poetry* 196). The “waking spirit” realized by *poesis* makes a fundamental break from the status quo—“the bondages of habit”—moving the subject and objective world towards a perfect reunion. Eastman’s philosophy directly echoes Abrams’s categorization of the Romantic poet-seer, a secularized agent of an unseen will, as Eastman concludes, “the poet, *the restorer*, is the prophet of a greater thing than faith. All creeds and theories serve him, for he goes behind them all, and imparts by a straighter line from his mind to yours the spirit of bounteous living [emphasis mine]” (Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Poetry* 198). While Eastman may have dropped the specific allusion to God (he was a vociferous atheist at the time) and contemporaneously espoused “scientific” views, his philosophical works are redolent with mysticism, belying a belief in a relationship between inner and outer essence in the process of dialectical evolution. Art was propagandic by nature since it made the imagined world possible. For Eastman, “in his concern with all life, the full life, and ultimate achievement of the good life for all people, socialism assimilated the art as life theory and made it real...Socialism took the concepts—awareness and action—and made them vivid realities” (Maik 78). *The Masses* was a perfect vessel of *poesis* for the radical socialist imagination. Especially under

Eastman's editorial direction, combining art, poetry, fiction, journalism, all available textual modes to reify the socialist mind and world.

This program was on full display in the July 1913 issue (the same year *The Enjoyment of Poetry* was published). Writing in his monthly editorial section, "Knowledge and Revolution," Eastman sought to exemplify "proper" idealism. He attempts to delegitimize the church's hypocritical moralizing, offering a more "scientific" way of realizing a more perfect world. It is a fascinating moment in which he rhetorically substitutes one guiding essence in a teleological scheme for another: "All through the ages," he writes, "it has been the tacit assumption of idealistic people that by dint of preaching they could make men unnaturally 'good.' They could make the rich altruistic and the poor either prudent or content with an humble lot, and so solve the inequities and ultimately remove the bondages and miseries of men" (Eastman, "Concerning Idealism" 5).⁸ In direct antithesis to this misdirected idealism of course stands socialism as embodied by *The Masses*.

For here is all the joy and the glamour of idealism attending a labor which directly

opposes that to which they have looked for *the salvation of the world*. We do not teach that the rich must be altruistic and the poor prudent or content with their lot. We teach that since the rich will not be altruistic to the extent of relinquishing their essential privilege, it is necessary for the poor to be ill content...to marshal themselves against the rich...to take from them the sources of their privilege. We put our trust not in the propagation of altruistic sentiments among all, *but in the*

⁸ Recall Eastman's use of the word "bondage" in the *Enjoyment of Poetry* quoted in the previous paragraph in which he avers that the power of poetry releases one from "the bondage of habit."

enlightenment of the self-interest of the poor. We put our trust in this for the salvation of the world." (Eastman, "Concerning Idealism" 5, emphasis added)

For Eastman, it is not the notion of Idealism or "salvation"—a word that is twice used in the quotation—that is misplaced, but the wrong methodology. This is a key point, for Eastman is not removing the narrative structure of the story that is being told, he is merely readjusting the terms by which it is identified. The trans-historical struggle between antipodal forces moving in conflict until salvation remains: the theological context of good and evil, grace and sin, is merely secularized into a material context of class: poor against the rich. Whereas the Christian enlivens the apocalyptic redemption through their internal struggle with sin and communion with God, the socialist achieves this through the development of class consciousness, "the enlightenment of the self-interest of the poor."

My point is not to necessarily draw a moral judgement of the ways in which Eastman emplots history but to better understand the consequences of such self-described propagandistic discourse at least with regards to the way in which reality is "translated." History retains its romantic-Christian teleological arc (progressive linearity moving towards atemporality), and while the "subjects" (the characters, if you will) have been substituted for classes, the struggle which defines them is still a reductive dichotomy between good and evil. It is a stark vision in black and white that views the inner essential characteristics of either party as immutable. Notice that Eastman does not expect the inner enlightenment of socialism to emerge in both parties—"We teach that since the rich will not be altruistic to the extent of relinquishing their essential privilege, it is necessary for the poor to be ill content"—but ascribes the moral exigency only to "the poor." A compelling argument though it is, it is a vision of the world that forecloses nuance. There is a great sieve behind the logic which organizes all that is intelligible into good and bad—

with us or against us. Even “science” seems to be animated with purposiveness. Eastman continues:

We have studied history and economics, we have observed the men and conditions of our own time, and we have seen that the *method of progress* toward equality and fraternity is the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors; and to that struggle...we have committed ourselves for the sake of the ultimate ideal. We do not therefore hold ourselves to be either less or more idealistic than those who preach brotherhood as an artificial emotion and with no method for its achievement. *We simply hold our idealism to be more scientific.* (Eastman, “Concerning Idealism” 5, emphasis added)

The emphasis here is on the proper “method of progress.” The “idealized” agents of historical process as they are envisioned theologically, good and bad, again is substituted by “the oppressed” and “their oppressors,” moving toward the “ultimate ideal.” Eastman in no way suggests that the framework he is providing us with is not an idealized vision of reality—that which is ideal or “preperceived” in the imagination can be rendered real through appropriate action.⁹ Yet he does insist that his vision is in specific ways more “real” because it is grounded in a correct scientific methodology. Rather than the study of the Christian spirit and its relation to the divine, the socialist methodology studies “history and economics,” “the men and conditions of our time.” The signs which guide historical processes to their inevitable telos in “equality and fraternity” are read in the material conditions of the world. Yet one might ask, beyond the assertion that the methodology is more scientific, in what ways does it really differ from

⁹ Recall Eastman’s *poesis* and the function of the imagination: “it is not only an imagination, but a preperception, and its value culminates in the more full experience” (Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Poetry* 196).

theological exegesis? Recall Jameson's categorization, "history itself [is] God's book, which [one] may study and gloss for signs and traces of the prophetic message the Author is supposed to have inscribed within it" (Jameson 29). In Eastman's socialist historical text, the text which is being read for signs is secularized from God's book to the material conditions of the world, and while the Author as a present symbol isn't verbalized, the purposiveness of the signs being read still suggests the presence of a supernatural guiding will moving history towards its secularized apocalyptic reunion.

My point here is that this argument is decidedly more theological than it is scientific. Modern science is expressly non-purposive in theory and is ostensibly focused on the collection of specific data which might render a reasonable hypothesis. Yet a hypothesis is always necessarily a tentatively diachronic interpretation subject to rejection. Modern science at its core is primarily concerned with the synchronic data. History does not have a meaning; evolution, in particular, is a process of development in which organisms respond to environmental stimulus for their survival, not the collective mobilization towards an end. In contrast, as Hayden White avers, "Marxists do not study the past in order to construct what happened in it, *in the sense of determining what events occurred at specific times and places* [the synchronic analysis]. They study history in order to derive the laws of historical dynamics [emphasis mine]" (White 142). In short, Marxist history is a form of exegetical interpretation in which history is assigned a definitive plot, and "it can be innovative and constitutive of a new life for humankind only to the extent that it has actually divined the laws of history and used them to uncover the 'plot' of the whole human drama which renders its surface phenomena not only retrospectively understandable but prospectively meaningful as well" (White 142). Marxist discourse must necessarily emplot all historical phenomena within a moralizing semiotic system. In the ways

that Christian exegesis looks to interpret all events as allegorical manifestations of the relationship between divine will and fallen materiality (Papal Rome as the precursor to the realized New Jerusalem, for example), the Marxist must contextualize contemporary struggle and its potential telos within an idealized superstructure whose text has led to the inevitable clash between capitalist and proletarian. Hayden White further comments, “many modern Marxists, embarrassed by the similarities between this notion of history and its religious, specifically Judaeo-Christian [sic] prototypes, have tended to play down this prophetic aspect and given themselves to the study of discrete, concrete historical and social phenomena” (White 142). While various socialist theorists at the turn of the century in America adapted Herbert Spencer’s theories of evolutionary progress to suggest the inevitability of the centralized control of a Proletarian state, all musings of the scientific objectivity of the movement were always appropriative at best.¹⁰ The espousal of science for socialist causes served mostly to locate the moving forces of history within a so-called material realm which thus supplanting theological authority.¹¹ “By historicizing and naturalizing all forms of life, Darwin provided crucial underpinnings for the ‘one science’ that Marx had predicted would arise with the social revolution. Revolutionaries should therefore assimilate Darwinism as a resource for the making of a historical materialist world view, but not as the basis for direct political argumentation or

¹⁰ “During the 1860s and 1870s Spencer was an active member of the radical circle around John Stuart Mill, taking a pro-Darwinian stance after the publication of the *Origin* and joining other liberals and evolutionists in expressing a fundamental abhorrence of slavery and imperialism. But he became increasingly alienated from this group as ‘radicalism’ came to imply government intervention and socialism...Spencer defined evolution as the movement of all matter and phenomena ‘from a less coherent state to a more coherent state...[he] held it to be a single process at work throughout the cosmos: ‘One evolution going on everywhere after the same manner...’ [he] proclaimed that organic and social development would ascend without pause: ‘Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity...so surely must man become perfect’” (Pittenger 18-20). The end result of social evolution was thus peaceful equilibrium in which individuals lived in a socio-economically balanced, decentralized, and heterogenous state.

¹¹ For a more detailed history of American Socialists’ appropriation of evolutionary theory, see Mark Pittenger’s *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought*. Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.

social prediction” (Pittenger 17). Darwin’s non-teleological theory was in many cases only incorporated into various socialist ideology as means towards the total secularization of Christian teleology, erasing the trace of the divine and supernatural from history while still utilizing their narrative function: a vague allusion to Hegelian spirit or the inevitable outcomes of the materialist dialectic. The nominal erasure of the divine gave credence to the “realism” of socialist discourse while ignoring the fundamental lessons of evolutionary theory.

The exegesis of the real world was repurposed from the scriptural allegory to the material. Especially at the turn of the century, with the drastic acceleration of industrial technologies, the progress of technological development could be interpreted allegorically as signal of the progressive movement of society towards its telos.¹² In “Breaking Barriers” from the February 1911 issue, Wilhelm Ostwald situates the invention of the airplane as just such a sign of progress towards epochal change in the Telos. His article begins with a brief description of the evolution of the nascent solar system from a “gaseous sphere, which slowly turned into a fluid, and finally became a solid” (Ostwald 15). This initial progressive schematic descent from gas, to liquid, to solid, interestingly enough prefigures the narrative arc of the piece by tracing humanity’s technological navigation from the lower back to higher orders of form (one is tempted to see the re-inscription of Edenic fall in these contours). Ostwald describes each successive ascent as an intrinsically superior advance from the last as the new technologies designed for each respective order outdo the others:

¹² While certainly indigenous and colonized peoples were awake to the awful power of European technology, the bloody lessons of the mechanization of war had not yet crystallized in Western discourse at the turn of the century. The First World War drastically marks a historical moment in which the ambivalence of technology toward human progress is marked.

It was on the solid parts that man first moved. He required an incalculably long period of technical development to obtain some degree of power over the fluid element.

That old chicken-hearted Horace, even in his day...was still aghast that a man could have had the idea to embark on open waters. Contrast that with the present, when a trip across the Atlantic is so pleasant that I, for my part, would rather spend two weeks on the sea than two days in a railroad coach. A sea trip is cleaner—and *safer*” (Ostwald 15, emphasis in original).

Note the preferential order ascribed to the technologies and their respective spheres. The steamer is far more amenable to human comfort than the grounded coach because, as the intrinsic logic of the article suggests, more superior technology was required to reach the secondary sphere of matter (liquid) than the first (solid). Ostwald continues his progressive narrative: “now we stand at the threshold of a third period, when man is making the gaseous part of our world accessible to us. There is no doubt that this *signifies a new epoch of civilization* [emphasis mine]” (15). In technology’s progress, Ostwald interprets the coming paradisaic socialist union: “in the flying machine I see a powerful instrument for bringing about the brotherhood of man” (15). Despite his brief rumination that possibly the “conservative partisans of war are eagerly furthering the perfection of the flying machine, which stands for man’s technical progress, because they expect that the conquest of the air will produce extremely effective mode of warfare in the future” (15)—a bitterly ironic moment of prescience—he nonetheless doubles back: “we will let this go, because we can anticipate the true and final results. And the final results will be that under the pressure of circumstances we shall give up all those linear boundaries which artificially divide territories allied to one another geographically and economically” (15). In the potential mobility of the airplane, Ostwald reads the inevitability of the dissolution of international boundaries and

the unification of humanity in what he alludes to as “The United States of the World” (16). He further “reads the signs” of this teleology in other quotidian phenomena: “yet we are constantly witnessing the fall of one artificial barrier after the other. Universal mail service will lead irresistibly to a universal stamp, and next to universal money” (16). Technological development thus catalyzes the progress of civilization to a universalized state and an even a more advanced human being:

We are wont to lay many evils at the door of technical progress. But now we see that to compensate, it in the end raises human worth by opening up activities to man more in keeping with his character. Future man will be as different from men nowadays...the bicycle has made workmen keener and readier. Similarly, we may now expect that the flying machine will produce a comparatively even greater advance in typically human characteristics...the beings that will soar in the air will and must be a superior race. (18)

In the end, the “many evils” wrought by technology will more than be compensated for the benefits of a racially superior “future man” that is distinct and of a higher order than “men from nowadays.” The present terrible fallen condition of the world will be mitigated by some technological event-horizon beyond which is a better world. Ostwald concludes, “the wounds that the development of machinery in its early stages produced, the horrible misery of the great cities, a higher stage of technical development will surely heal” (18). Hindsight indeed, and perhaps his vision may yet prove true, but the remainder of the century had many lessons for Ostwald, and perhaps, if nothing else, surely displayed the ultimate indifference of technological power with regards to the human condition. The same science and technological apparatus that feeds billions now seems more likely to be leading towards definitive tragedy than it does

romantic triumph. Nonetheless, my point here is that the ideological frame of Ostwald's article, its narrative demands, condition him to desire to see the ultimate linear trajectory towards epochal change. The signs in history he is reading—technological development—can only be interpreted in relation to the text of socialist history, revealing his ideological desire for fulfillment.

As naïve as Ostwald's interpretation of the invention of the airplane may appear, its overly simplistic vision of the future and the progress of history easily demonstrates the contours of early socialist ideology in America. That is to say, in its simplistic vision, we may see a well rendered iteration of the kind of story socialism was attempting to tell about history, its function in the ideological imagination, and the way it conditions a subject to think about the world through a certain lens. As Hayden White adumbrates:

The act of reading requires that the subject assume a particular position vis-à-vis the discourse, on the one side, and the system of beliefs, values, ideals, and so on, that comprise his cultural horizons, on the other. To acquiesce in the adequacy of a given way of representing "reality" is already to acquiesce implicitly to a certain standard for determining the value, meaning, or worth of the "reality" thus represented. This standard, in turn is incarnated in the system of symbolic relationships under the aegis of which all forms of "legitimate" authority are offered for the subject. (White 88)

Ideology thus sets the parameters for the way one reads history, the way it arranges narrative, plot, and character. This means that it not only conditions certain conceptions of how the world works, what questions and answers may be asked of it, but more importantly, it projects a system of *value*, determining not only what is good and bad for the subject (the character within the

plot), but *who* the subject is, what their role as a part of the whole, whether it is to the Other, a collectivity, or a system of authority in general.

Thus far I have attempted to show how the revolutionary discourse of *The Masses* is a direct inheritance of the discursive tradition of Christian teleology in its anticipation of apocalyptic reunion with the ideal, and the role of the individual subject in the exegesis and fulfillment of it. But upon my last point in the preceding paragraph, I would like to briefly ruminate upon the effect that such revolutionary discourse had on the perception of subjectivity, that is to say, who began to be included among that number. The insistence on revolutionary change meant that along with the old economic structures, social structures might be cast aside and reformulated. The potential vacuum projected into the future left space for those who had been previously neglected by hegemonic politics to suddenly enter. As Pittenger suggests, “SP [socialist party] intellectuals stressed the leading historical role of the working class. Whether they viewed workers primarily as voters, union members, or revolutionary activists, socialists now saw them as the subjects, not the objects, of historical evolution” (Pittenger 115-116). It is easy to perhaps pass by this point, and perhaps to solely attribute inclusivity to one amorphous political phenomenon, but looking at the broad inventory of historical texts, one would venture to ask where is the story of the Roman plebian or the medieval peasant that defies caricature? The inclusivity of a working class into the text of history is thoroughly modern. The displacement of the aristocrat or bourgeois subject by the urban and agrarian proletariat demonstrates a marked shift in *values*.

While *The Masses* may have been comprised mostly of white middle class perspectives, its emphasis on expanding the role of the subject has had lasting consequences. With regards to the much celebrated artistic submissions, Rebecca Zurier writes, they had an “interest in their

subjects as people—the implication that ‘real life’ was more likely to be found on the lower east side than among the vanity and pretension of the privileged classes, and the idea that the proletariat had its own culture and humor that were worth getting to know” (Zurier 40). Time and again, the magazine published articles and art that were intentionally antithetical to mass marketing and the easy consumption of American society. As Zurier further notes, “when *The Masses* published Stuart Davis’s cover showing a grotesque image of two working girls from Hoboken over the caption, ‘*Gee, Mag, Think of Us Bein’ on a Magazine Cover!*’, the artists were striking a blow for realism and independent expression, and against the capitalist art market” (Zurier 41). The prominent display of the “grotesque image of two working girls from Hoboken” published on the cover of the June 1913 issue challenged an art market that favored beauty and the preservation of feminine delicacy, eschewing what was most easily sold for what the artists of the *Masses* considered to be a more fervent representation of the world as most people lived it. While this is perhaps the most famous moment in which the magazine debuted “proletarian art,” it was but a drop in the pool. Over the course of the magazine’s short life they featured a variety of scenes of the urban poor, working class women, saloons, polling stations, and featured numerable articles on workers’ rights, ending child labor, sexual liberation, women’s rights, Freudianism, and near the end of its publication a call for an alliance with the NAACP. In its brazen radicalism, *The Masses* represented one early attempt in the post-civil war era to open mainstream Anglo-American society up to the potential for socialism and inclusivity in politics.

Conclusion

Looking back at *The Masses* now, over a hundred years later, it is easy to both be struck by its naivete and inspired by its radical vision. Its reproduction of Christian teleology crafted a

perception of reality that was overly simplistic, reducing the complexity of social relations into two finite orders of oppressors and oppressed. This lack of nuance, with its insistence on revolution as the only viable method of absolute change, can lead to draconian consequences. The most obvious example of course is the Stalinist regimen (or in our own era as evidenced by the similarly idealized but differently narrativized propaganda of Fox News). The potency of such propaganda is a result of its power to craft and deploy a narrative of history that appeals to conservative and neoliberal dogma alike: a notion of the nation as proposed in an ideal past with an idealized economic structure. The current ideological structure that arose in the latter half of the twentieth century was neoliberal in flavor, redefining the function of the individual as primarily an independent economic agent whose well-being could be defined in proportion to the size of the American economy and freedom from the constraints of government power. Such a worldview ignores the systemic injustices built into economic systems both within and without the national polity, and furthermore, neglects to define well-being beyond simple access to capital. The “free market” essentially has replaced the *polis* as the guarantor of the essential values of democracy. The president may now make the claim that the economy is booming and receive applause without examining to whom the greatest proportion of the economy is benefitting. Discussion of liberty has indeed been monetized in a way, as has all considerations of value. Important questions are therefore suppressed, such as: what is the function of the state as a collective enterprise? What is the function of the economy in general? What do subjects of the state owe to each other? And most crucially, and indeed existentially, is the current system sustainable? Neoliberal discourse which thus orientates the subject in relation to the market seeks only to preserve and expand the status quo (and the blame should be shared to some extent between both political parties). Simply put, society’s ability to imagine a radically different

future has been suppressed; a fact which in the face of climate change *will* prove to be fatal. While *The Masses* and the early American socialists may be criticized for oversimplifying and repurposing narratives of change, they can at least be lauded for introducing progressive notions, fighting for broadened inclusivity, critiquing the social system as a whole in order to reassess value. *The Masses* itself is given much credit for openly promoting radical issues which seem to be givens today: contraception, equal rights, child labor laws, antimilitarism, among others. But perhaps most importantly, its emphasis on a working class, the non-bourgeois subject, and the preservation of individuality, meant that the magazine was imagining a future space where those oppressed and silenced could gain representative value and self-determination while thinking of themselves as an empowered part of the collective whole (a transnational and intersectional whole at that). Historical determinism and material dialecticism aside, the fundamental lesson we may take away from these revolutionary ideologies is not their ability to predict a utopian future, but to assess *value* in the present, to question the fundamental structural relationships that have formed through the course of modernity and to reimagine those relationships amongst a broadened idea of who a subject is, what the point of society should be, and what a modern morality should look like. If a contemporary socialistic movement is to succeed, it is this last point upon which it must craft a powerful ideological narrative. The inevitable progress of technology and society cannot be a given. It is the fundamental understanding of value and moral obligation which can prove to be its most powerful and enduring propaganda. One might argue that inefficacy of the Left in America has been due to such tepid acceptance of the neoliberalist terms of affairs. The inability to iterate and inspire radical vision, to plot a way beyond simple reform, has surrendered the narrative of history to a nationalistic chauvinism that has a clear if frightening story to tell.

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