

Hemingway and Dos Passos: The 1930s

Majed S. Al-Lehaibi, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Herbert Solow's declaration (of April 1938) in "Substitution at Left Tackle: Hemingway for Dos Passos" (Partisan Review 4- April 1938, pp 62-64) refers to the idea that Dos Passos, who had been strongly leftist since 1916, began in the second half of the 1930s after a period of aloofness to move away from that philosophy while Hemingway began to move towards it, thus falling into the popular front's anti-fascist ideology.

Keywords: Leftism, Popular Front, Fascism, Proletariat, Socialism

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Introduction

Herbert Solow's declaration (of April 1938) in "Substitution at Left Tackle: Hemingway for Dos Passos" (Partisan Review 4- April 1938, pp 62-64) refers to the idea that Dos Passos, who had been strongly leftist since 1916, began in the second half of the 1930s after a period of aloofness to move away from that philosophy while Hemingway began to move towards it, thus falling into the popular front's anti-fascist ideology. To begin, U.S.A. spells out Dos Passos' suspicion "of anyone with rank and position, distrusting all those who held economic or political power...[his concern is] how to preserve the sanctity of the individual" (Pells, p. 237). He saw communism becoming a system, a huge establishment (similar to industrial capitalism) of hypocrites hoping to rise within the Communist hierarchy without sensitivity to ordinary human needs. As evidenced in the execution of Sacco and Venzetti, Dos Passos asserted his famous concept of two nations, two Americas: The owners, who had the police power and ran the big institutions, and the dispossessed masses of people. The case of Sacco and Venzetti is symbolic of the struggle between the "two nations" of ordinary people versus the institutions.

The Big Money" (1936) shows the characters emerging defeated as a result of this struggle. Exhausted by her futile struggle to save Sacco and Venzetti, Mary French goes to bed and dreams that the entire world is falling apart. Conversely, Charley Anderson chooses to leave his position as a mechanic and seek "the big money." He thus becomes a stockbroker but is eventually beaten by the capitalist system. He wishes that "[he was] still tinkering with that damn motor and didn't have to worry about money all the time." Juxtaposing Mary's hope for socialism with Charley's fall illustrates two kinds of failure: the futility of the socialist cause, and the flimsy ambitions of success promised by capitalism. This conveys the sense of disillusion Dos Passos held against both sides (the left and right) which ultimately became institutionalized. His concern shifted to the "lone individual," Daniel Aaron Rontes. Kazin notes, "the heroes are always broken, and the last figure in U.S.A., brooding like Dos Passos himself over that epic of failure, is a starving and homeless boy walking alone up the American highways" (344).

Dos Passos' suspicion of the Communist agenda was intensified by the execution of his friend, Jose Robles, after having been charged with being a Fascist spy. Robles had left his position at Johns Hopkins to fight with the Loyalists in Spain. Arguing that Robles was murdered because "Russian secret agents felt that Robles knew too much about the relations between the Spanish war ministry and the Kremlin and was not, from their very special point of view, political reliable" (qtd in Aaron, 344), Dos Passos wanted to expose and politicize the murderous Communist agenda held by his friends. However, Hemingway told him that he would not have been executed by the Loyalists if he had not deserved such treatment. This clearly marks the point of departure in their friendship.

Hemingway criticizes Dos Passos' disillusionment with the extreme left party in the character of Richard Gordon ("To Have and Have Not" (1937)), a proletarian writer who is currently writing a novel about a strike in a textile factory. Here, Gordon's wife, Helen, says that he is "changing your politics to suit the fashion." (150). Hemingway had been maintaining his "professional aloofness" (Cohen) in the first

half of the 1930s, since he maintained the position that politics and art do not mix. He wrote in a letter in 1932, "If the boys swing to the left in literature you may make a small bet the next swing will be to the right and some of the same yellow bastards will swing both ways." (He adds in this letter that Dos Passos "doesn't swing. He's always been the same") (qtd, Wgner, 48). Hemingway's quiet move to the left, possibly motivated by a realization that his writing was out of touch with the current plight of humanity, began with the publication of "Who Murdered the Vets?" (1935) in the *New Masses*. In this article, he writes with indignation about U.S. Army veterans carelessly left by the Government in the Florida Keys to perish because of hurricanes. Hemingway sees the veterans as worthless in the eyes of the Government since "yacht owners know there would be great danger, unexpected danger, to their property if a storm would come (hence you do not see them and their yachts in the keys during this season) ... veterans, are not property. They are only human beings,...all they have to lose is their lives." Although this is not a leftist article but a complaint against the government, the leftist camp saw it as a move toward the left; "[the article] suggested that Hemingway was going somewhere..." Hicks commented (qtd, Meyers 213).

Hemingway mentions these veterans again in his 1937 novel, "To Have and Have Not," as battered individuals having no odialogue and drinking away their meaningless lives under the auspices of a callous government. In this novel, Hemingway can be seen to move even closer toward "social consciousness." He writes about proletarian group solidarity and "brotherhood" of the "conches," and about proletarian writers such as Richard Gordon. Most importantly, his main character, Harry Morgan, is an ordinary man, which makes him a unique character among Hemingway's heroes. Hemingway made this character, the dying Morgan, utter the message of solidarity carried by the book: "No matter how a man alone ain't got no bloody f--ing chance."

Hemingway became attracted CPUSA after its official announcement in August 1935 via "The Popular Front" by Georgi Dimitroff, that they would abandon their explicit revolutionary activities of the Third Period and join the progressive resistance against Fascism. He viewed the Communists as playing an important role in fighting fascism in Spain and considered it a necessary cure. Yet Hemingway makes it clear that the Communist anti-Fascist agenda is what attracted him rather than its revolutionary ideology. Harry Morgan's opinion about the revolutionary Cubans as a bunch of murderers is unique: "What the hell do I care about his revolution? F-- his revolution. To help the working man he robs a bank and kills a fellow works with him and then kills that poor damned Albert that never did any harm. That's a working man he kills." And Robert Jordan, in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," admits that he is only "anti-fascist." In "Hemingway: the 1930s," Reynolds writes "[Hemingway was] neither right nor left, but opposed to government of any sort, he trusted working-class people, but not those who would lead them to the barricades and not the masses en masse" (which makes him consistent with the position he noted in his 1932 letter mentioned previously) (211). However, Herbert Solow recognizes that Hemingway started to "rise to 'beatified' heights for critics like Gold, Hicks, and Cowley" (Cohen).

"The Fifth Column" stresses the urgency of fighting fascism in Spain even after the fascists had won the war. To be in the "Fifth Column" implies being strictly dedicated to the cause; therefore, Philip must get rid of his mistress whom he intended to marry,

since she takes him away from his duty: "we're in for fifty years of undeclared wars and I've signed up for the duration." Philip's statement echoes Hemingway's address in the second American Writers Congress of June 1937 that "no true writer could live with fascism" (Reynolds, 270). In his preface to "The Fifth Column," Hemingway wrote, "it will take many plays and novels to present the nobility and dignity of the cause of the Spanish people." This status of Spain in Hemingway's mind looms in the background of "For Whom the Bell Tolls." The opening lines of John Donne, "All mankind is of one Author, and is one volume...No man is an island, entire of it self," summarizes the era's cult of that group. The hero, Robert Jordan, finds a noble cause in war and in fighting the injustice symbolized by the Fascists. He is "not a real Marxist." He hates authority and believes "in Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity...in Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness...." He tells himself, "If this war is lost all of those things are lost." Therefore, Jordan accepts "Communist discipline...[of following order and trying] not to think beyond them... for the duration of war." He follows the Stalinist ideology of "means justify the end," that there is a need to kill people in the interest of a higher cause, which brings the concept of martyrdom to the other end of the equation. The conclusion stresses the theme that in sacrifice and martyrdom, one enters into a spiritual oneness with the group and the universe: "one and one is one." Ray West calls this remark "the end of despair and futility" (qtd in Hoffman, 101). The novel was received with applause by the left, since it fulfilled the expectations of those among the leftists. Daniel Aaron writes that Hemingway had "Become the party's favorite literary name" (351).

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