

The Gold Standard

Michael Gold: The People's Writer, Patrick Chura, State University of New York Press, 2020, pp. 354, \$95.00 hardcover, \$26.95 softcover.

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Patrick Chura, a professor of English at the University of Akron, has written the first serious biography of Michael Gold, the American Communist Party's most famous writer between the two world wars. Born Itzhok Issak Granich in 1893 to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, he grew up on the impoverished Lower East Side of New York City. He is best known for his 1930 autobiographical novel *Jews without Money* which argued that only a communist revolution, "the true messiah," could eliminate the poverty of the Lower East Side and bring "a garden of the human spirit."

Mainstream scholars of American literature have not considered Gold a significant writer, and his only book of note is *Jews without Money*. Chura,

by contrast, argues for Gold's importance both then and now. He was, he tells us, "the originating force of the once-mighty movement for a workers' literature," one of the "cultural luminaries of his generation," and "a prophetic voice for contemporary radicals." At a time of "corporate control, wealth disparity, and the mainstreaming of proto-fascism, Michael Gold should be more than ever of interest to a cultural establishment whose attention to his work has been insufficient." According to Chura, Gold and other left-wing writers have been unfairly marginalized by a literary establishment exercising hegemonic power. In contrast to writers and intellectuals who deserted the left "to the tune of Nobel Prizes or election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters," Gold never lost faith in the political ideals of his youth.

Gold became a doctrinaire Marxist while still in his teens. In "my suffering youth, I feverishly sought God and found Man," he recalled. The religion of communism replaced the Judaism of his parents, and he remained a true believer in communism and the imminence of revolution until his death in 1967. His prophets

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were Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, and he named his two sons Nicholas (for Nikolai Lenin) and Carl (for Karl Marx). A Soviet postcard of the 1930s contained a quote from Gold: “The war against us is coming. For all who have any hope for the future, there is only one duty: Defend the Soviet Union.” Gold’s two brothers, Manny and George, also became committed communists.

Gold was a zealous follower of whatever wisdom emanated from an infallible Kremlin, although he was uncomfortable during the 1930s when the Soviet Union downplayed the need for a communist revolution, courted various anti-communist liberals and socialists, and called for a United Front to oppose fascism. He supported American isolationism during the 1930s, justified the Soviet purges of the 1930s, and rationalized the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August, 1939, only to reverse himself when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June, 1941. While the great majority of left-wing American writers and intellectuals fled or drifted away from the left in general and communism in particular

during the 1930s, Gold remained a true believer.

Chura provides no evidence that Gold knew anything about economics and history. His *métier* was radical journalism, not literature or literary scholarship, and his writing exhibited journalism’s best and worse features. The noted literary critic Alfred Kazin described Gold as an “inadequate or foolish critic” of literature and his journalism as “twaddle.”¹ Gold’s major contribution to literary criticism was his 1921 essay “Towards Proletarian Art” where he defined and called for a “proletarian literature.”² The major concern of such a literature should be poverty, which, Gold assumed, was the inevitable offspring of capitalism.

Countless historians and economists have shown that poverty had been pervasive throughout the world prior to the modern era, and capitalism has proven to be the most effective economic system for increasing economic growth and alleviating poverty. Gold’s emphasis on the poverty he experienced on the Lower East Side blinded him to the fact that most of its residents lived there for only a short period of time before moving to

1 Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), 382, 415. Other scholars of American literature have also been dismissive of Gold as a writer. Thus the massive *Cambridge History of the American Novel* (2011) has only two brief mentions of Gold.

2 The American literary historian Markus Klein noted that “barbarians” promoted proletarian art, with Gold being the chief barbarian. Klein, *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 183.

nicer neighborhoods in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Their rise up the economic and social ladder was due in part to the economic opportunities afforded them by a relatively free market.

Gold was a fierce polemicist and the cultural enforcer of the American Communist Party. He also was not a particularly nice person. Morris Dickstein, an historian of twentieth century American literature and culture, called Gold “the most reliable and vituperative of Stalinist hatchet men,” “a nasty propagandist” with a “brutal style of invective.”³ Markus Klein, another historian of American literature, said that Gold embodied “bullying combined with sheer vulgarity.”⁴ Gold’s most vicious attacks were directed at former longtime friends as well as literary luminaries who refused to accept the most recent iterations of Soviet propaganda.

The most famous of these attacks was Gold’s 1930 *New Republic* essay “Wilder, Prophet of the Genteel Christ” which, Chura writes, “scandalized readers and touched off a nationwide” controversy. Its target was Thornton Wilder, the author of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and other

popular novels. Wilder’s sin, according to Gold, was writing “chambermaid literature” and “boulevard piety” for the “genteel bourgeoisie” rather than proletarian literature for workers which highlighted their poverty and unemployment. Chura claims that Gold’s motivation for attacking Wilder and other writers was to create “a new literary culture and canon that looked more like America,” or at least an America of Gold’s imagination in which the communist revolution was just around the corner.

Gold’s other literary targets included Dorothy Day, William Faulkner, Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, Robinson Jeffers, Lewis Mumford, Archibald MacLeish, John Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Albert Maltz, Waldo Frank, Eugene O’Neill, and particularly Ernest Hemingway, a veritable Who’s Who of twentieth century American writers. Thus, Gold described his former friend Eastman as “a filthy and deliberate liar” and the poet Jeffers as a “poor little bourgeois neurotic.”⁵ Hemingway and Gold had been close friends during the 1930s and even vacationed together, but Gold turned against Hemingway after

3 Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 20-21, 31.

4 Klein called Gold “the chief literary assassin for the Communist party of America.” Klein, *Foreigners*, 152, 231.

5 *Ibid.*, 231.

the publication of his 1940 Spanish Civil War novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This novel, Gold said, revealed Hemingway's "petty-bourgeois renegadism," "vile and enormous treason," "class egotism," "the poverty of his mind," and his ignorance of social reality.

Gold's most vituperative writing was directed at the "opportunists" and "lackeys" of capitalism who deserted communism during the 1930s. Chura shares Gold's revulsion toward these "renegades." "In switching allegiances," Chura says, these apostates had

sent a signal that revealed the cultural and class loyalties they had held all along. The phenomenon of middle-class writers identifying with the causes of exploited workers, the poor and downtrodden, then abandoning that attachment when it became expedient, was not new or unusual. What was new was that they were being called out harshly by a proletariat artist and critic with a large following, one whose commitment to his class, and to the class struggle, was genuine and durable.

Chura, whose analysis at times verges on adulation, believes that those critical of these attacks have overlooked their significance. They were, in fact, "a catalyst in the development of cultural studies, the type of thinking that ultimately, though not in Gold's lifetime, produced a broader literary canon, the end of the New Criticism in favor of more contextualized methods of study, and more democratic trends in the humanities." Whether Gold actually had much of a following is questionable, and certainly the exponents of proletarian literature were less influential in the interpretation of literature than John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and other New Critics.

Chura dubs Gold "the people's writer," and this leads one to ask "what people"? Certainly not the millions killed under the Stalinism Gold supported, with its policies of forced agrarian collectivization, military and political purges, show trials, and antisemitism. And Gold was singularly out of place in the United States, where the vast majority of people considered themselves to be middle-class. Few working-class Americans, including most unionists, supported communism or socialism. Gold ignored or failed to perceive what numerous critics have called American "exceptionalism," meaning its lack of a feudal

past, a stratified class system, and its creed grounded in liberty, individualism, egalitarianism, populism, and laissez faire.⁶ Instead, he extolled the American “masses” who supposedly longed for a communist revolution.

But election returns tell a different story. In 1932, at the height of the Great Depression, the candidate of the American Communist Party received a paltry 108,000 votes, while the Republican Herbert Hoover garnered 16,800,000 votes and the Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt received 22,800,000 votes. Four years later and while the country was still in the midst of hard times, the Communist vote declined by over 25 percent to 80,000, while the combined votes of the two major political parties increased by more than 12 percent to over 44,400,000. And this was at a time when American communism was supposedly in its heyday.

The American audience of this “people’s writer” disdained Gold and everything that communism espoused, including the elimination of private property, the centralization of decision-making into the hands of an elite group of intellectuals and politicians, and a government approximating that which existed in Moscow. “The people” who actually read and

admired Gold never comprised more than a small sect of isolated, disgruntled, and estranged individuals who believed they were the vanguard of a new world order.

The use of the term “people’s writer” tells us more about Patrick Chura than it does about Michael Gold. Chura is not an historian and his reverential biography contains some serious whoppers. Communism, he claims, was “a peaceful, democratic, and consistently progressive force for good in U.S. social history.” This will surprise most historians of American communism. Chura says the radical literary critic V. F. Calverton was a “liberal,” even though he was the editor of the Marxist magazine *Modern Quarterly* and the author of *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932), arguably the most important Marxist survey of American literature published during the 1930s. Calverton, however, was not a communist, and he was criticized by communists for not joining their ranks. Perhaps this is why Chura mistakenly believes him to have been a liberal rather than a radical since a true radical would have been sympathetic toward communism.

Chura further argues that Sacco and Vanzetti were blameless victims

⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

of a “bigoted legal system” and were “persecuted for their beliefs,” even though there is strong evidence that the couple were guilty of the crime for which they were convicted. He also writes that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were targets of “Cold War hysteria,” scapegoats for American diplomatic and military failures, and the targets of a “judicial lynching.” The Venona intercepts released by the United States government in the 1990s, over two decades before the publication of Chura’s book, have convinced even the most stalwart defenders of the Rosenbergs, including their two sons, that the couple were complicit in the passing of atomic bomb documents to the Soviet Union.⁷ The Rosenbergs were committed communists and were willing to die for their cause, to orphan their children, and to betray their supporters rather than to admit their guilt.

Historians, sociologists, and political scientists have been debating for over a century why the Michael Golds of America have been so marginalized as well as why the United States has been the only major industrial country without a strong socialist and communist presence. Posing the question in this way implies that America has been deviant, and the task of the

scholar should be to explain the reasons for this deviance. Gold and Chura would have us believe that a major factor explaining this American exceptionalism has been governmental repression, hence the discussion in Chura’s volume of Sacco and Vanzetti and the Rosenbergs.

But what if the question is not why there has been so little socialism in America, but why there has been so much socialism in other advanced industrial countries, despite the superior economic performance of capitalism. One wonders also why the rapid social and economic ascent of the immigrant residents of New York City’s tenements did not convince Gold of the superiority of capitalism. Needless to say, these questions were not asked, much less answered, by either Gold or Chura. Perhaps this was because for both men radicalism was more a living faith rather than an economic system, and few persons are willing to abandon that which has given a purpose and meaning to their lives, and which provides an explanation for the world’s major problems.

⁷ For more on the Rosenbergs, see Harvey Klehr, “The Eternal Return of Ethel Rosenberg,” *Mosaic* (online), October 4, 2021.