
The Thirties Revisited: Clifford Odets and the Depression

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Abstract

This paper discusses the proletarian plays of Clifford Odets which he wrote in 1935: **Waiting for Lefty**, **Awake and Sing!**, and **Paradise Lost**. In these plays Odets protests the exigencies inflicted on American people by the Great Depression. He depicts the plight of the working class and the middle class during the 1930's in American society and criticises the tenets of American capitalism. The image of the playwright that emerges in his social drama is that of a proletarian reformer who tries to make his audience aware of the evils of the Depression so as to highlight the need to take action to replace capitalism with a more egalitarian system. Odets' social and political views were influenced by the Group Theater which was dedicated to the dissemination of proletarian of proletarian ideas.

The Great Depression of the 1930's produced a host of social playwrights who grappled with the economic and social disasters that the Depression brought. They expressed anger at the American capitalistic society for allowing the conditions of the Depression to happen. Many of these dramatists were associated with the Group Theater, an off-spring of the Theater Guild, which devoted its repertory to plays of social criticism.¹ As a model of such Leftist writers, I propose to discuss Clifford Odets (1906-1963) whose birth as a dramatist is commonly attributed to the throes of the Depression, and to his relationship to the Group Theater, a troupe which itself was an outgrowth of the Great Depression (Shuman, 1968: 39-41). For the purpose of discussing Odets as a proletarian playwright expressing the **zeitgeist** of the thirties in his drama, I will confine my argument to the three plays which he wrote in the same year, 1935: **Waiting for Lefty**, **Awake and Sing!** and **Paradise Lost**.² The Great Depression provided Odets with the raw material for writing these social plays for which he has become known. In these plays Odets depicts the plight of the working-class man in modern society, and criticises the tenets of American capitalism. The playwright, who belongs to a working-class family, defends the working class and the middle class, which he reveals in his plays to be in danger of extinction because of the inroads of the Depression.³

Odets' early plays show the sickness of the American capitalistic society in which life, as Ralph of **Awake and Sing!** succinctly puts it, is "printed on dollar bills."⁴ The image of the playwright that emerges from these plays is that of a socialist reformer who tries to reach the hearts of his audience and make them aware of the evils of capitalism. Odets, like many Leftist intellectuals of his time, used his drama to attract people, especially the workers, to social reform and economic equity. However, the kind of socialism Odets and some other Leftist writers (i.e. Steinbeck) embraced is less ideological than spiritual. It comprises the beliefs that money should not become the idol of the social system that governs the destiny of people, and that wars are usually fermented by business tycoons (Bigsby, 1983: 176-77).

In his 'depression' plays Odets presents the injustices and calamities inflicted on the American people by the Depression. The specter of the Great Depression of the 1930's overwhelmed America and made many people jobless and homeless. In the aftermath of the crash in the stock market in 1929 many disasters followed: factories shut down and others laid off thousands of workers. Unemployment became nationwide and prices skyrocketed. People lost their savings because banks failed. For the workingclass and the middle-class family, the Depression was disastrous (Cantor, 1978: 9). Clifford Odets indicates that millions of

Americans were out of work; poverty was widespread, and consequently people started to think of socialism as the haven of economic safety (Odets, 1952: 3456).

The Depression was not merely economic disaster. Rather it penetrated the conscience of every American and made him reconsider the mythical American Dream that America was untouchable by the failures of Europe (Bogardus, 1982: 1). Writers of the thirties reflected the spirit of this period and reported its social woes in naturalistic portraits. They eventually became politically conscious of the troubles in their land and hence got involved in the search for a better alternative to replace the capitalistic system, which they blamed for bringing about the Depression.⁵

For many people, communism began to seem the best political system to achieve social justice and a better world. Indeed during the years of the Depression many American writers such as Richard Wright in **Native Son** and John Steinbeck in **The Grapes of Wrath** seemed to be embracing communism out of their social despair and their yearning for social betterment. In contrast to capitalism, communism stood as the hope of the poor and the workers. Shannon mentions that "In 1931 and 1932, talk of social revolution became common. Surely, thought thousands of people, the dispossessed and the hungry will revolt against the government and the economic system that had brought them to their desperate situation" (Shannon, 1960: x). However, the social revolution many people had expected never happened. It is true that some people thought of emigrating to the Soviet Union.⁶ The drama of this period reflects this fact. For instance, Dr. Benjamin, in **Waiting for Lefty**, thinks of emigrating to the Soviet Union. However, he prefers to remain in his country and fight for his rights.

But a social revolution of some sort was happening on the stage. For instance, the Group Theater, of which Odets was a charter member and for which he wrote all of his early plays, was permeated with proletarian politics and anger. In **The Fervent Years**, Harold Clurman, the director of the Group Theater, mentions an incident concerning the production of **1931**, a play by Claire and Paul Sifton about unemployment, that illustrates the spirit of the thirties:

The last night of the play the balcony was packed. Each night the audience had grown more vociferous. But that night there was something of demonstration in the theater, like the response of a mass meeting to a particularly eloquent speaker. As the actors - surprised and moved - were taking the curtain calls, a man in the

balcony shouted; "Long live the Soviet Union!" Franchot Tone, on the stage, shouts back, "Hurrah for America!" Both outcries might be described as irrelevant, but evidently there was something in the air beyond theatrical appreciation (Clurman, 1946: 71-72).

It has been usual for Odets and the Group Theater to employ socialistic themes such as anger against capitalism, the desire for comradeship, and the need for the masses to unite and work together to force the capitalists to improve their working conditions. In line with the standing position of the Group Theater on proletarian issues, Odets wrote **Waiting for Lefty**, an agitprop play which calls for a strike in order to force the labor leaders and capitalists to improve the workers' conditions. Agate on the stage and the audience in the auditorium shout out "Strike, Strike, Strike" as the play ends.⁷

Through writing about the effects of the Depression on American people, Odets becomes a proletarian dramatist. Shuman defines proletarian literature as follows:

Proletarian literature may be defined as that which is primarily concerned with presenting a sympathetic and understanding portrayal of the lives, problems and sufferings of the working class while at the same time exposing the social injustices and inequalities of an age. Some proletarian writers suggest remedies for the conditions about which they write; some merely present the problems in their grossest aspects and suggest no realistic remedies (Shuman, 1962: 37).

Underlying Odets' plays of the thirties is a belief that society is susceptible to change for the better, and that it is possible to achieve paradise on earth if the individual is given a chance to work. Odets' plays suggest that people are faced with severe economic exigencies, they will struggle to change their social order. For example, Edna, in **Waiting for Lefty**, tells her husband, Joe, their furniture has been repossessed because Joe has failed to pay the installments on it. She threatens to desert her husband and join her former boyfriend if Joe does not take steps to improve his financial situation. She urges him to rally other workers and call for a strike: "For God's sake, do something, Joe, get wise. Maybe get your buddies together, maybe go on strike for better money" (p. 12). Common sense decrees that one think of radical change when economic conditions deteriorate.

The Depression seems to have been the main reason for Odets to join the Communist Party. His membership protested the thriving of capitalism

at the expense of poor workers.⁸ When interrogated by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952 about his communist activities, Odets explained his motivation for joining the Communist Party:

I believe at that time there were perhaps 15 or 16 million unemployed people in the United States, and I myself was living on 10 cents a day... There was a great deal of talk about amelioration of conditions, about how should one live, by what values should one work for, and in line with this there was a great deal of talk about Marxist values... I finally joined the Communist Party in the belief, in the honest and real belief, that this was some way out of the dilemma in which we found ourselves (Odets, 1952: 3456).

Odets' plays reveal that the depressive economic conditions of the thirties compelled him as well as many other writers to think of communism as a solution to their quandary.

However, unlike many communist writers who write proletarian literature simply because they are committed to serve the Party, Odets, as Joseph Wood Krutch suggests.

... seems to have identified himself with the Communist Party only after he had begun to write.. His conversion did not deprive him of a subject and one of the most interesting things about his plays is the fact that he has managed to avoid rather more successfully than any of his fellows the tendency to assume almost automatically that a communist play must treat directly one or another of the two or three situations which have come to be taken for granted as inevitable (Krutch, 1939. 263-264).

Krutch's statement gives a clue to Odets' deserting the Communist Party after only eight months of membership while still continuing to write about social injustices and the virtues of collective work.

One may conclude that Odets joined the Communist Party because like many intellectuals and artists of the thirties, he saw communism as the only hope of man's redemption from the claws of capitalism. But Odets, again like such Leftist writers as Silone of **Bread and Wine**, and George Orwell of **Homage to Catalonia**, found out the treachery and one-sidedness of communism. Therefore, Odets decided to quit the Communist Party in his belief that to work for the masses and to expound social ideas do not require one to be a member of the Party. The

playwright refers to this fact when he tells the House Un-American Activities Committee that the communists,

.... would have liked to have had me write what they would call.. "progressive plays." They would like me to write plays on what themes they would think would be burning issues of the day. I am sure, for instance, the Communist Party thought that the war in Spain was a burning issue of the day... I didn't respect any person or any party or any group of people who would say to a young creative writer, "Go outside of your experience and write a play." I knew that as humbling as my beginnings were, and they certainly were, that I could only write out of my own experience, out of my own incentive (Odets, 1952: 3476).

The significance of Odets' drama stems not from his being at one time a member of the Communist Party, but rather from his belief in the American people and in the dignity of man. As Mendelsohn puts it, "...it is evident that Odets always loved people in that vague, abstract, idealistic way which makes the thirties writers of the Left admirable.. There is little reason to believe that he would have written anything had he not been motivated by the inequalities of American society that he observed (Mendelsohn, 1969:127).

In play after play written in 1935, Odets portrays scenes of the woes inflicted on American people because of the Depression. For instance, lack of work in the thirties made it difficult for young people to marry (Allen, 1939:132-134). This is quite evident in Odets' early plays. Pearl and Felix, in **Paradise Lost**, cannot marry simply because Felix cannot find a job as a musician. Bessie, in **Awake and Sing!** opposes Ralph's marriage to Blanche because the latter is poor: "A girl like that he wants to marry. A skinny consumptive-looking... six months already she's not working - taking charity from an aunt" (p.65). And although Ben, in **Paradise Lost**, marries Libby, he cannot support her--on his wedding night, he has to ask his mother for money. Because he is out of work, his wife and he become prey to Moe. There is also a couple, Sid and Florrie, in **Waiting for Lefty** who cannot marry because of the Depression. Evidently the whole marriage question in Odets is related to the theme of nonfulfillment, which is prevalent in his early plays.

The general feeling prevalent in Odets' plays is that of frustration. Characters simply sit, unable to do anything to improve their economic conditions. Therefore, some of them try to evade the sombre reality of their lives by yearning for the past as a means to escape from their daily financial troubles. The playwright, for instance, describes Myron in

Awake and Sing! in these words: "Life is an even sweet event to him, but the 'old days' were sweeter yet" (p.37). Myron is immersed in the past; he admires Teddy Roosevelt and lives in his reminiscences of his childhood: "There's no more big snows like in the old days.. I was a little boy when it happened-the Great Blizzard. It snowed three days..." (p.86). Similarly Gus in **Paradise Lost** hungers after his past life: "I can't explain it to you, Mr. G., how I'm forever hungerin' for the past. It's like a disease in me, eatin' away..." (p.207).

Odets suggests that the frustrating economic crises of the Great Depression breed virulence and discontent in society. This is evident in the tendency of his characters to become quarrelsome. For instance, in **Paradise Lost**, Kewpie hits Libby in the face, and then beats Ben. Other characters are preoccupied with death. The idea of death runs throughout **Awake and Sing!**. Myron will "drop dead", remarks Moe, "when I tell him his gentle horse galloped in fifteen to one. He'll die" (p.49). When Bessie tells Moe that Hennie is going to marry, he says, "Who's the corpse?" And when Bessie scolds her daughter for getting pregnant, Hennie shouts back, "Shut up! Shut up! I'll jump out the window in a minute" (p.54). And of course Jacob, the idealistic grandfather, commits suicide.

It should be pointed out here that Odets is not interested in presenting the problems of individuals as such, but rather those of the whole American society. Odets' statement concerning **Awake and Sing!** in **New York Times** of December 15, 1935, indicates that each of his plays represents a miniature for society:

By the time I came to write **Awake and Sing!** I understood clearly that my interest was not in the presentation of an individual's problems, but in those of a whole class. In other words, the task was to find a theatrical form with which to express the mass as hero... Our confused middle class today (Odets, 1935).

Awake and Sing! presents three generations of the Berger family living in the same house. Pressed by the hard economic uncertainties of the Depression, all live in disharmony. They have corrosive relationships among each other. Jacob, who represents the older generation, commits suicide, leaving his legacy to Ralph in order to give him a chance to start a new life. Bessie and Myron, who stand for the middle generation, work hard to keep the family intact. For this reason Bessie cheats Ralph of his legacy, left to him by Jacob, in order to protect her family from the economic threat of the Depression. And Hennie and Ralph, who represent the younger generation, are no less victims of their

circumstances than their parents. Hennie is forced to marry Sam Feinscheiher whom she does not love simply because her mother wants to maintain the respectability of her family in the eyes of her neighbours by hiding the shame of her daughter's pregnancy. The idealistic Ralph falls into self-deception by not realizing the economic difficulties his family is trapped in.

Mendelsohn comments that Odets' plays present the majority of American society, which is middle-class, as unable to overcome the problems of the Depression: "Odets here attempted to portray an entire class floundering aimlessly, heedless to the fact that it is trapped by forces beyond its control (Mendelsohn, 1969:36). In other words, in line with his socialistic orientation of this period, Odets is presenting through his characters the illness of an economic system that infects every individual in society. Hit by the economic failures of the Depression, the Gordon family in **Paradise Lost** disintegrates completely. Leo, the father, loses his business. One of his sons, Julie, is dying of encephalitis, and the other one, Ben, is shot by the police in a robbery in which he tries to steal to support his wife and family. Eventually the family loses its home and is thrown in the street.

Odets presents the capitalist as the only person who thrives on the misery of humanity. The scene between the laboratory assistant, Miller, and the capitalist, Fayette, in **Waiting for Lefty** portrays capitalism as ugly. For Fayette "the world is an armed camp" (p.15). However, like all Odets' idealistic characters, Miller refuses to spy on others or compromise with Fayette, telling him, "They say 12 million men were killed in the last one and 20 million more wounded or missing" (p.15). Fayette replies, "That's not our worry. If big business went sentimental over human life there wouldn't be big business" (p.15). In **Paradise Lost**, Katz is another example of a bad capitalist. He cheats his honest partner and opposes measures to improve the workers' conditions.

Awake and Sing! and **Paradise Lost** present another ugly face of capitalism in the persons of Moe Axelrod and Uncle Morty. Both Moe and Uncle Morty are well-to-do. But both of them are moral and physical cripples. Odets describes Moe as a man who "lost a leg in the war. He seldom forgets that fact. He has killed two men in extramarital activity. He is mordant, bitter" (p. 38). Uncle Morty is also described as "a shrewd judge of material values. He will die unmarried... He can blink in the sun for hours, a fat tomcat" (p.38). Kewpie is another example of a bad capitalist. He degrades Ben for usurping his role as a husband.

The alternative to the capitalistic system as envisioned by the early

Odets is a socialistic solution of collective work. In a jubilant outcry, Ralph asserts at the end of **Awake and Sing!**: "Get teams together all over. Spit on your hands and get to work. And with enough teams together may be we'll get steam in the warehouse so our fingers don't freeze off" (p.97). The playwright envisions in this play a better world than the one in which the characters of the play suffer. Jacob, an idealist Marxist, inspires Ralph to believe in the future. In **Paradise Lost**, the workers in Leo Gordon's shop threaten to go on strike unless their conditions are improved. Their demands are met partly because they stand together to defend their rights and partly because of the benevolence and socialistic tendencies of Leo Gordon.

However, Odets' idealistic belief in the future and the inevitability of change as voiced by some of his characters remains wishful thinking. Odets expresses his faith in young people, but no one knows for sure whether they will bring about a better life. Though Ralph ends **Awake and Sing!** with a fiery speech full of hope and determination, no one is quite sure whether a better life lies ahead. In spite of Leo Gordon's egalitarian tendencies and sympathies with the workers he falls into more financial problems to the extent of losing his factory, his savings, and his house. And shortly after writing these socialistic play, Odets realised the falsity of the Communist Party as an egalitarian socialistic system.

Odets' phase as a proletarian dramatist ended when he went to Hollywood. he departed from the social anger of his early plays to discuss other social issues such as alcoholism, aging, and the exploitation of the artist in modern society. It is only in so far as his 1935 plays are concerned that Odets is considered as a proletarian writer. The playwright's early plays are agitprop dramas that call for social, political and economic reforms. They express anger at capitalism and appeal both to workers and to the poor to unite. The themes of these plays may be summed up thus: (1) the call to overthrow capitalism; (2) the call for the downfall of labor bosses; (3) an outcry against social discrimination; and (4) a call to preserve human dignity. Though Odets' membership in the Communist Party lasted for only eight months, he continued to write about social and political issues using Marxist rhetoric even after abandoning the Party. Odets' social and political convictions were influenced by his association with the Group Theater which dedicated its repertoire to plays of social significance and proletarian issues.

Notes

1. The names of such playwrights include Albert Bein, George Sklar, Paul and Claire

Sifton, and Albert Maltz. None of them of course has reached the dramatic stature of Clifford Odets who is by large the most significant social playwright of the 1930's.

2. I have excluded **Till the Day I Die** from consideration in this context though it was written in 1935. The play deals only with the struggle between the Nazis and communism, and the persecution of the Jews in Hitler's Germany.
3. Critics have discussed Odets' Jewishness and its influence on his politics. Odets came a Jewish working - class family. His father worked as a feeder to a printery. Later he became a middle-class man. Odets' mother worked in a factory, and Odets was proud of her. He told the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952 that his mother was a working woman and she died, "a broken woman and an old woman at the age of 48." See **Hearings Before the Committee on Un-American Activities House of Representatives**, May 19-20, 1952 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952), P. 3481. The studies that deal with Odets and his Jewish backgrounds are many. They include: (a) R. Baird Shuman, "Clifford Odets and the Jewish Context," in Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., **From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 85-105; (b) Shuman, "Clifford Odets," in Frank N. Magil, ed., **Critical Survey of Drama**, vol. 3 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, Inc., 1985), pp. 1395-1405; (c) Shuman, "Clifford Odets: A Playwright and His Jewish Background," **The South Atlantic Quarterly**, 71, no. 2 (Spring 1972), 225-233; (d) J. Shaar, **Escape from Authority** (New York: Basic Books, 1961), p. 174; and (e) Margaret Brenman-Gibson, **Clifford Odets: American Playwright, The Years from 1906-1940** (New York: Atheneum, 1981).
4. Clifford Odets, **Awake and Sing!** in **Six Plays of Clifford Odets** (New York: Modern Library, 1939), p. 95. Subsequent references to the play are to this edition and volume and will be cited within the text in parentheses.
5. As an illustration of the involvement of the 1930's writers in the problems of the Depression I quote Irving Howe as saying: "Shaken loose from the traditional opinions, frequently forced to accept a sharp drop of income, sometimes pushed into the ranks of the jobless some American writers broke away from the routines of literary work in order to travel across the country, measuring the human costs of the depression. Edmund Wilson, Erskine Caldwell, Sherwood Anderson talked to hungry men in New York, listened to desperate strikers in North Carolina. The vision of the United States that began to emerge in their minds was notably similar to that of John Dos Passos's **U.S.A.**" See Irving Howe, "The Thirties in Retrospect," in Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds., **Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930's**, (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), p. 15.
6. For instance, Josephine Herbst recounts her journey to the Soviet Union in her article, "Yesterday's Road," anthologized in **Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930's**, pp. 29-45. The article originally appeared in **New American Review** 3 (1968).
7. Clifford Odets, **Waiting for Lefty** in **Six Plays of Clifford Odets**, p. 31. Subsequent references to the play are to this edition and volume and will be cited within the text in parentheses.
8. Odets joined the Communist Party for about eight months, 1934-35. His

dismemberment raised a lot of critical speculations. Some critics ascribed it to Odets' bitter experience in Cuba. In 1935, Odets, with fourteen members of the Communist Party, visited Cuba to investigate the social and economic conditions of the Mendieta regime, which the group thought was supported by American capitalists. Odets and his companions were arrested by Cuban authorities. Add to this the fact that Odets began to believe that the Party had used him for propaganda purposes.

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