



SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF JOHN DOS PASSOS

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Abstract:

A few American writers, who have seen man and society in proper proportion, and who have had the power to realize their vision in terms of the novel, seem to have chosen two principal methods of coping with the peculiar difficulties presented by the vastness, newness, shapelessness and instability of American society and by their own inescapable self-consciousness about it. Dos Passos novels might be said to have attempted a development of this second method by putting down a series of sample borings all over the surface of America. In the novels of Dos Passos, the fate of individuals becomes ensnared in the complex transformations of American society and politics. Indeed, the fierce of change and its oppressive influence on people bring Dos Passos to the brink of determinism: His characters seem incapable of bucking these coercive trends. The most successful characters adapt to change, allowing their principles and temperaments to be guided by the fluctuations of fashion. The present study focuses on social and political consciousness in the novels of Dos Passos.

Key Words: Dos Passos, Social, Political & Consciousness.

Social and Political Consciousness in the Select Novels of John Dos Passos:

Most American social novelists have lacked a sense of proportion in their treatment of society, and, one may relate this to the extraordinary importance in the history of the American novel of "realism" and in the non-philosophical, literary sense of the term, of "naturalism." In America the novelist's use of "realistic" techniques has often represented a self-conscious attitude towards society rather than a genuine understanding; their preoccupation with a realistic presentation of the social surface, in which everything tends to become equal importance, may often disguise an essential ignorance of deeper social realities. Such is undoubtedly the case with many "muckraking" novels, with most of the "proletarian" novels of the 1930s and with a large proportion of contemporary "tough" or expose novels about such subjects as politics, business, the entertainment industries, and advertising.

Dos Passos is an American novelist, essayist, poet, and journalist. He is best known for his social and political novels of pre-World War II America. His central concerns are social injustices, the failure of the American Dream, the exploitation of the working class, the loss of individual freedom, and the injurious emphasis on materialism in American society. Detail and realism are important elements in his work, often emphasized through such innovative means as his "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye" techniques, and the inclusion of bits of "biography." Strongly social and political, he moved from his early, leftwing revolutionary philosophy to a later conservatism. The U.S.A. trilogy is considered to be his masterpiece.

The Unity of impression which is achieved in *Manhattan Transfer* would have been impossible, had the novel been given a structural arrangement based on anything but theme. It is always theme which determines which characters and what episode is to be presented. This method is an adaptation of a device that Dos Passos uses in most of his novels. In *Three Soldiers* he had shifted his angle of narration, in *Rosinante to the Road Again* he had alternated essay with narrative. In *Manhattan Transfer* he juxtaposes many concurrent narrative fragments, each with its own continuing angle of narration. It is noteworthy that if all of the narratives related from the viewpoint of any one character were put together in sequence, the result would still not constitute an adequately developed plot.

Each part is nothing without the whole and is necessary to the complete picture of the whole. The chance of mingling of the lives of the characters, an increasingly common device in the works of Dos Passos from *Three Soldier*, forward, is not outside the realm of possibility and is necessary if he is to approach his theme from multiple viewpoints and yet maintain coherence.

Dos Passos's attention to unity is emphasized in that in 1924 he published a short story called "July" which concerns Jimmy Herf and his Merivale relatives. For two important reasons Dos Passos, a man never hesitated to publish anything in three or four different places, it did not include the story in *Manhattan Transfer*. In the first place, the setting of the story is in Virginia, which would have violated the unity of place, the story,

while it adds emphasis to the contrast between the characters of Jimmy Herf and James Merivale, really adds nothing essentially new to the character of either.

When Dos Passos completed *Manhattan Transfer*, he was showing more and more interest in the relation of the individual to the "machine." He had developed three basic patterns of reaction to it. First, there is the pattern set by James Merivale who never merges his consciousness with reality and who thus never recognizes the manner in which he prostitutes himself to the dictates of the "machine." Second, there is the pattern of Jimmy Herf who apprehends reality and who takes steps to escape from the "machine." Third, there is the pattern of John Andrews who perceives the reality of the "machine," who rejects existence in a world containing it, and who thus seeks escape by oblivion as a martyred idealist. Dos Passos had also learned to experiment successfully with structure. He had learned to produce symbols that were pointed and useful without being ornate or "arty" and he had increased his skill in producing images of sharp impressions with the greatest economy of words. He had, in short, established most of the techniques which he would use later.

Like many twentieth century fictional masterpieces, *Ulysses*, Faulkner's, *Yoknapatawpha Saga*, Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* seeks to portray a culture in both historical depth and social breadth by means of modernistic techniques. There is thus a modern epic convention, to which *U.S.A.* belongs, in which the traditional aim of the epic to make manifest the history and values of a culture is achieved, not by conformity to a prescribed set of epic rules, but by the author's individual adaptation of the complex fictional devices that have arisen in the twentieth century for the depiction of the interaction of self and society. The success of works in this convention derives not only from the depth of the author's insight into his culture but also from the appropriateness and effectiveness of the modernistic fictional forms that he has chosen to render his vision.

U.S.A. can be discussed meaningfully in a number of ways. But that the final test of its value and centrality in twentieth century art lies in its nature and quality as modernistic epic American novel. Dos Passos's model for the epic was principally Whitman as *U.S.A.* seeks to depict in full detail the "varied strains" that is the American experience. To Whitman too, can be attributed to Dos Passos's belief in a semi mystical oneness in the multiplicity of America. He was above all the nation's history of democratic idealism. There is also of course Whitmanesque element in the deep exploration of self in the *Camera Eye*, an exploration that in the end. It is an exploration of what America should be isn't. Thus, one of the most pervasive and central sources of relatedness of unity, in *U.S.A.* is in its character as a self reflexive novel in which the *Camera Eyepersona's* search for identity and his role results simultaneously in a vision of self and a vision of America that is the remainder of the trilogy.

Each of the four modes of the trilogy is therefore both a modernistic fictional form and a contribution toward an epic rendering of twentieth century American life. One of Dos Passos's major achievements in the trilogy arises from his recognition that the four modes could be linked not only by their common reference to an overarching epic intent but also by constant juxtaposition allusiveness of epic matter, event, theme and symbol. *U.S.A.* is a kind of cubistic portrait of America, one in which the effect is of a multiplicity of visions rendering a single object, with every angle of vision related both to the object and to every other angle of vision. It is Dos Passos's relentless pursuit of juxtaposition relationships in the seemingly disparate and fractured modal ordering of the trilogy that is largely responsible for the integral vision of American life in *U.S.A.*

Of course, liberty is not the only idea that cannot be found in Dos Passos's works, nor are childhood and adolescent frustrations the only determining factors in his life. But the three types of libertarian anarchism, individualist, socialist, and conservative. These are fundamental to a consideration of Dos Passos's social thought. Such libertarianism is the chief message of his life and work and it is unmistakably accompanied, and conditioned by an Oedipus complex.

Dos Passos's criticisms of American society though rooted in his own observations of his own era are remarkably similar to Whitman's criticism. The political and economic history of the United States during the twenties led Dos Passos to believe that the moral state of the middle class was most unhappy. But he was too perceptive to neglect examination of radical as well as conservative society and private as well as public life.

As a result, *U.S.A.* offers, in addition to much vivid history, a provocative moral vision. It portrays, among other human experiences, the evil of abusing men for private or political ends, the vanity of separating art or meaningful life from the needs of fellow men, and the costs and consolations of individual integrity.

Dos Passos has been writing over a long period, and the shifts in his political attitudes are partly the reflection of profound changes in the whole political situation, both at home and abroad. Moreover, it is the very generosity and acting of his protests against injustice and inhumanity, whenever and wherever they may occur, has sometimes led him into intellectual inconsistencies. All of his work, however, is informed by a deep attachment to a conception of America which it seems fair to call both Agrarian and Jeffersonian. In all his books the institution or the aggregation is the enemy, bigness is evil. The destruction or erosion of individual integrity and dignity are tragic and not less, because this is seen to be the fate of everyman in a modern urban industrial society.

U.S.A. nonetheless remains the crucial text for any attempt at penetrating the deep center of Dos Passos's artistic life. The distinctive formal devices of the three novels contribute decisively to their meaning.

The Camera Eye, which, despite the ambiguous suggestion of its title, represents the survival within the total fictional world of the individual subjective consciousness, remains formally isolated. The various fictional structures of U.S.A. Newsreels, Biographies, Camera Eye, and Narrative sections are discontinuous. Such a form enacts Dos Passos's sense of the fragmented nature of the individual social and political experience of modern America. The Camera Eye may allow the individual sensibility a continued existence. But it is an ineffectual existence, cut off from the collective reality that encompasses it. It is as though Dos Passos had been forced to agree that the gap between public and private experience is now unbridgeable.

Dos Passos had been never a participant but always a mere onlooker hungry for participation, so that he had to depend only on observation from outside, it would explain much. But such is not the fact; he took part in the World War and in the Sacco-Vanzetti case and other activities. He has been no mere spectator of the world. Moreover, he must have powerful and lasting purposes and emotions to have written his books. It is hardly credible that he has done so little thinking as he makes out.

Dos Passos's self-portrait must be playfully incomplete, if only because he is a real man. But it is possible that he may have chosen to suppress something in himself and in his writing. He may have acquired a distrust of thought and feeling and will which has forced him back upon sensations as the only reliable part of experience. Some such process seems to have taken place in many writers contemporary with him, resulting in a kind of spiritual drought, and in a fear lest they betray themselves or be betrayed by life. Perhaps the disillusionment of the war had something to do with it, but more probably a partial view and experience of their present society are responsible.

U.S.A. conforms to some but not to all of these assumptions. The lack of any protagonists in the trilogy and the equal attention given to many people, have generally been taken to represent Dos Passos's recognition of the importance of the collective idea. The book's historical purpose indicates the author's belief in social determination.

Dos Passos speaks of sanctity, they speak of survival, where he lives by the truth of the Camera Eye. They live in the whirling mass of that society which Dos Passos has always been able to measure, with hatred but not in panic, from the outside. Dos Passos is the first of the new naturalists; U.S.A. is the dominant social novel of the thirties. But it is not merely a vanished social period that it memorializes. It is individualism, Protestantism, a power of personal disassociation, which seems almost to speak from another world.

Dos Passos comes to the same conclusion as Fitzgerald. The meaning of America, its initial promise, has been lost as Americans have gone whoring after false gods. The potentiality of America is the possibility of creating the good society. It has been lost as Americans have fastened their ambitions on some goal, The Big Money. Not only do both see a perversion of the ideal meaning of America. Both associate that ideal with greenness, meadows the vast fields of the republic and place the historical possibility of realizing, that ideal somewhere in the past, in some unalterable moment whose memory haunts the meaninglessness of a debased and immoral present. Both are sad books, one a mournful song, the other outraged despair.

Conclusion:

The contrast is deepened by this emphasis, and the society in which Mac, Moorehouse and the others exist is given the appearance of a great. Following his creative movements, Dos Passos adopts the point of views of the dismayed that, observing the disaster at first hand but unable to determine its cause, runs helplessly about. The crowded yet atomized world which he depicts a world excellently realized through many techniques of the novel is not a world explicable as the product of strict historical laws. In refusing to be a social theorist, while at the same time using the observable facts from which social theorists would draw their conclusions. The form of this trilogy is a perfect embodiment of this division between nature and spirit. The main blocks of the narrative portray characters groping in a hopeless jungle of sensation and instinct, whereas the Camera Eye cries its somewhat irresponsible protest against the retreat from the American Dream, denouncing the wrong culprit as often as the right one.

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