

The Red Scare Post-War World and Nelson Algren (interview with Paul Buhle)

I think we better start a little ways further back to the early and mid '30s because the Depression bottoms out in some respects by the middle of the 1930s, and the New Deal programs and a modest increase in economic growth - very modest, gives people not only a way to stay alive, but a way to be hopeful, and politically, what takes place is that young people who have been involved in these extremely left-wing energetic cultural activities like the John Reed Clubs, they find themselves enjoying the New Deal more than they would have expected and very frequently then make a living in the Works Progress Administration Writers Program or Artists Program, the Theaters Program and so forth. So they find themselves having gone from way on the left to the left of the center, but also seeing their participation in New Deal programs as a sort of transition to a better society, a new society, more egalitarian society, but not exactly the overthrow of capitalism in the fashion that they had imagined in the early Depression.

I should say as a little - going back a little bit, that the House Un-American Activities Committee, an extreme right-wing effort within Congress to track down reds, most specifically Jewish reds and punish them, comes into being in the late 1930s, and just as the war is getting closer and then as the Hitler-Stalin pact period makes Russia look bad, HUAC begins holding hearings in Hollywood and in effect putting all of American entertainment under the spotlight. Who are the reds? And specifically, who are the Jews who are corrupting American youth? That's the focus of the House Committee on Un-American activities.

This is suspended during 1942 to '45 because the Soviet Union is stopping Hitler at enormous sacrifice and everything seems sort of okay. Winning the war is the most important thing, and Henry Wallace, the Vice President under Franklin Roosevelt is one of the most popular people in America. As we know, Henry Wallace didn't get re-nominated as Vice President for 1944. Nelson Algren will support his candidacy in 1948, which will put him and others under the eye of the FBI. Harry Truman is president and the Second World War has ended, and from that moment on, not only the far right, but also the business-oriented center of the Democratic party want very badly to punish the left as they had wished to do during the 1930s, and to reinvigorate a business-oriented Democratic party to serve as the counterpart of the Republican party and make sure there are no other factors within American politics.

So writers like Nelson Algren, theatrical people who had been active in the left, artists of various kinds and a whole array of the most creative people from the 1930s face possible persecution, arrest for something or other, but more likely pursued by the FBI, loss of their occupation, loss of the ability to exhibit their paintings, for instance, and really hostile reviews of whatever they did, whether it was writing books or making movies or painting pictures, and therefore they were put in a very, very strange and uncomfortable situation.

This is going to come crashing to an end by 1950, but between 1940 and 1950, many of the best so-called proletarian novels written by left wingers like Tom Bell, are written and even published, at least, and even made into films, and likewise, much of the depiction of poverty conditions - even more so the depiction of difficult racial conditions that people imagined, envisioned in the 1930s, comes in the 1940s because it takes artists of all kinds. Time and space - to get themselves together and perfect their art so that the artistic message that was coming into being from the early '30s and then accelerating with the support of the New Deal is reaching towards its artistic realization in the 1940s and just at the time when the shadow of repression and blacklist are coming down upon them.

Algren would face denial of his passport and have an article nixed about him that featured the photos of Art Shay by the cold warriors of Henry Luce's Time/Life empire. He has his book contract with Doubleday cancelled as well, so Nelson Algren, the artist, was very affected by the blacklists of the 1950s. It greatly affects his role as an artist and is a huge part of his marginalization.