

DOS PASSOS TO HIS BIOGRAPHER CHARLES W. BERNARDIN

Four First-Published Letters

[Letterhead: 571 Commercial Street
Provincetown, Massachusetts]
Jan 3 – 1942

For my points of view towards communism at various times see

Journeys Between Wars, In all Countries. Harlan Miners Speak—testimony in Kentucky cases.
my pamphlet on the Sacco Vanzetti case.

Dear Mr. Bernardin,¹

Your suggested thesis is unfortunately based on a misconception, which is so current that I am taking a few minutes off to explain it a little. There has been current a tendency for many years to lump all forms of protest against our ways of doing things in this country (or better against our ways of doing things in the period 1919-1933) as communism. No discription [sic] could be further from the truth, though there have been times when liberals and communists have worked together for certain specific aims, which they desired for very different reasons. Probably the only time I accepted, in my own mind, any large part of the Communist thesis (a class war, salvation by revolution, the destiny of the working class etc.) was in 1919-21 or thereabouts. The terrific events at Kronstadt woke me up—as they did some other American liberals who were confusing the Russian revolution with the spirit of 1776. From then on until the advent of Stalin to power I had a sympathetic interest in the Soviet Union—where I felt that it was possible that something very useful to the world might be being created. In this country I cooperated with Communists in various enterprises such as the New Playwrights' Theatre, their campaign for the coal miners in Kentucky and even once cast a "protest vote" for the communist candidates (192[8?]), but by 1930 or '31 I felt that Marxism was a very dangerous pseudo-religion with a fake scientific base (a little like Mohammedanism say—if you substitute Marx's real historical ability for Mohammed's peculiar statebuilding ability) and that from the point of view of the principles of 1776—the whole business was a dead end.²

The Sacco-Vanzetti case is an excellent example. The liberals were trying to protect our historic tradition by demanding a fair trial; the bulk of the agitation was carried on by anarchists or trade union workers, in the last month before the execution of the two men, the Communists horned in on the business and carried off two victims for their martyrology. The peculiar complications of this period, during which the totalitarian parties were developing, are of great historical interest, so if you are writing about it, let me beg you not to take any current phraseology for granted and to examine very carefully all preconceptions.

To tell the truth my point of view towards politics has always been that of a reporter more than that of the addict of any particular philosophy, though I have considered it my duty to put in a word whenever I could for the underdog. The introduction to the *Ground We Stand On* is the only carefully thought out working up of a political creed I ever attempted.

Please dont write asking me where to get hold of books because I dont know—Best of luck with your thesis—

Sincerely yours
John Dos Passos

Notes

1. For a full identification of Bernardin, please see the accompanying article "A Novelist and his Biographer," on pp. 12-14 above.
2. Dos Passos' "protest vote" was in the presidential election of 1932. See his *The Theme Is Freedom* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1956), p. 101.

Palisades, N.Y.
April 20 1949

Dear Bernardin,

It ought to be fairly obvious that my enthusiasm politically is for individual liberty rather than for any particular forms in the organization of production. Naturally I have sympathetic feelings towards the people who are trying to produce socialism through democratic means but my enthusiasm is for the democratic means rather than for the socialism. A good social aphorism would be that the means are more important than the end.

About religion there isn't very much to tell. The Quakers are the sect I most admire, though I have always been

very much moved by the basic Christian story as dramatized among peoples of Spanish and Portuguese culture. Ask me about this ten or twenty years from now, if either of us lives that long. I'm answering your letters in a somewhat summary way, because I'm just about to pack up to catch a train. I'll be away for about a month off and on, on an article. If any questions come up that wouldn't take a three volume tome to answer drop me a line here so that I can pick it up at the end of the month when I come through.

Best of luck,
John Dos Passos

Spence's Point, Westmoreland, Va
March 25 1950.

Dear Bernardin,

I saw part of Mme Magny's piece in some French paper and thought it was one of the best critical things I'd seen on the subject. Read like a German and write like a Frenchman's a hell of a good motto. I was just feebly kidding about your researches. Let's skip it.

Possibly the aunts and uncles in the early works you speak of come from the attitude of my aunts & uncles towards my mother and the irregular situation in which she found herself and my resultingly maverick relationship to her family. It seems to me now that a good deal of that "early revolt" business is pretty much a rubber stamp and almost an automatic part of the mechanism of puberty. Gesell and Ilg's "The Child from Five To Ten" gives you an excellent picture of the standardization of children's reactions and behavior. Incidentally it's a very useful work if you have kids of your own. If such a work were written about the adolescent from fifteen to twentyfive I think the "revolt" mechanism would turn out to be as standardized. There was a good deal of sullen resentment about my childhood—a pretty unhappy one on the whole—but it was certainly not directed towards my mother, who was ill, as the result of a series of light strokes and a high bloodpressure situation that doctors had at that time no means of coping with. From the time I was ten or eleven I had to attend to many household details and make decisions during the periods when my father was away. When we travelled I had to attend to tickets etc. and in periods when there wasn't a nurse, do all the nurse's chores. That all possibly made for a certain independence which has stood me in good stead in later life.

On the subject of my father's being a capitalist etc. you musn't forget that when they were being formed trusts were considered as progressive and had social approval, except for the populist reactionaries who clung to the good old days of the corner grocer. Thus unions are now considered progressive etc except by those who cling to the

good old days of unrestricted power to the business man, and independence for the working people. To think clearly or historically you have to rid your mind of popular stereotypes. I've gnawed hard and long on this problem in *The Prospect Before Us*. My father like so many Americans of his generation always had a radical streak (Not using that adjective in its Greenwich Village sense). Even when he was profiting from trustifications and manipulations he was highly critical of them, as of all our institutions. As I [sic] child it was his unconventionality of mind that shocked and frightened me. His last years were spent working on a scheme for law reform in the interest of fairness and equality which he gave all his spare time to. He never could get the Bar Ass'n to endorse it and got to be considered rather a crank for his pains. I suppose I was so restless down here in Virginia partly because it wasn't the conventional summer resort life my schoolfriends and cousins were leading.¹ A boy in his teens worth his salt will be restless anywhere. Hell I was ambitious and wanted to see the world. It was only in my last years in college that I began to value my father's conversation and society. By the time I got really to appreciate him he was dead. These reactions are all standard in most men's growing up.

Cordially,
J.D.P.

Notes

1. In the left-hand margin, Dos Passos wrote here: "There's nothing so conventional as children, except possibly adolescents."

address for May
and June:

c/o Dr Perrin Long
307 Thornhill Road, Homeland,
Baltimore, Md.
April 30 1950

Dear Bernardin,

That letter you sent me was probably as accurate as the average eyewitness account of an event.

There were periods when I occupied an apartment at 6 Patchin Place Jack Lawson rented by the year but didn't always use. By the way I agree with you about George Meredith, though it is many years since I read anything of his. When I was in college I read him thoroughly, and felt as you do that his poetry was very much underrated. At Peterborough Lodge we had a lot of Latin Grammar, Sallust, and unless I'm mistaken some beginnings of Greek and I suppose reading, writing and arithmetic. I don't think I've ever fell [sic] for "Proletarian Literature" though in the twenties you are talking about I felt writing ought to

be about people who worked and felt great enthusiasm for and curiosity about working class life in general. By the way, *Jews Without Money* is a tolerably good book or seemed to be when I read it. Mike Gold was quite a talented fellow in those days, though incredibly lazy. He was planning to be the American Gorki but ended by only emulating Gorki's vices and weaknesses.

My mother was a sincere Episcopalian of the low church Maryland and Virginian brand, though she wasn't much of a churchgoer. Popery was much dreaded in her family. Her Aunt Netty, an old lady of whom I was very fond, walked out of her church in Georgetown never to return when a new parson lit two candles on the altar. My father was always proud of the fact that his mother came of Quaker stock (though I believe that personally she was a Methodist). In the moral atmosphere in which I was brought up it was held as a truism that only a Protestant could possibly have any ethics: I can see that you were

brought up thinking exactly the reverse. My father's beliefs were those of an eighteenth century Deist, though he was tolerant of religious forms and had several (I fear somewhat Epicurean) Catholic priests among his friends and drinking companions. He liked them for their tolerance and humanity. He also had a great respect for some of the narrow old Quakers he'd known as a boy in Philadelphia.

That's all I have time for now.

Sincerely,
J.D.P.

These letters and the quotations from Dos Passos in the article preceding them appear by permission of Mrs. Lucy Dos Passos Coggin. Except for a few instances where the editor has corrected typographical errors, all appear as in the originals.

Abstract of Ph.D. Dissertation

We attempt to publish abstracts of recent dissertations on Dos Passos that may be of interest to our readers. Such publication depends, however, on receiving the author's permission.

"Varieties of Literary-Political Evaluation: Six Critics on the Case of John Dos Passos," by James Michael Pangborn. 310 pages.

John Dos Passos attracts much explicitly political criticism. I examine six instances of judgment according to politically demanding criteria, explore the thought underlying them, and assess their claims. Paul Elmer More's curt dismissal of *Manhattan Transfer*, in context, reveals contradictions in typical conservative ideology, especially when analyzed in terms of its inherent image schemata. More's writings on Freud and Nietzsche repeat the misrepresentational pattern. A similar analysis suits Marshall McLuhan's characterization of Dos Passos as weak on modernist technique. The schemata associated with conservative dismissals also crop up in works that are not expressly political, however, as with Kathleen Komar's *Pattern in Chaos*. Reading *Manhattan Transfer*, I recast some features these critics attribute to authorial weakness as arguably valuable aesthetic choices.

Leftist critics judge Dos Passos more variously, though Michael Gold disapproves in terms markedly similar to More's. The question shifts with Barbara Foley's assess-

ment, however: I no longer ask why the critic is unduly dismissive; what needs explaining is how such perceptive commentary issues from the Marxist-Leninist theory she applies. Apposite readings from *U.S.A.* belie many of her theoretical statements but not many of her literary judgments. Such theory is more flexible than its critics suppose, largely due to its expectation of contradiction. Reading *Nausea* and Jean-Paul Sartre's other early works in order to interpret and assess his reasons for overestimating Dos Passos, I try to gauge his and other Marxists' romanticism (in a pejorative sense, excessive negativity or exaggeration of difficulty). Drawing on Iris Murdoch and Marjorie Grene, I find fault mainly in Sartre's depiction of human nature.

Dos Passos merits mixed response: overromantic in Sartre's way, he also uses conflicting aesthetic means for his partly political ends, but his literary value and pedagogical usefulness endure. I end with suggestions for reconstructive criticism, arguing for greater tolerance of ambivalence and uncertainty.

State University of New York at Buffalo, 2000