
”Comrades and Co-operators”: The Politics of Community in American Left-Wing Magazines, 1911-1929

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Abstract

In the editorial statement of the first issue of *The Masses* published in 1911, founder Piet Vlag addressed the readers as ”comrades and co-operators,” underscoring the magazine’s collective mission to connect ”all the people interested in co-operation.” When Max Eastman became editor in 1912, he refined Vlag’s communal vision, emphasizing the magazine’s ”revolutionary” character and its commitment to freedom of expression. Under Eastman’s direction, the guiding principle of *The Masses* became ”to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody, not even its readers.” With such an anarchistic mission, *The Masses* unsurprisingly clashed with the US government, and the publication folded when the ”co-operators” on the editorial board were targeted as ”co-conspirators” under the Espionage Act in 1917. *The Liberator* arose in 1918 as the magazine’s immediate successor but ceased publication under its name by 1922. Four years later, Eastman Mike Gold, and Floyd Dell, among others, revived the spirit of these older magazines in the *New Masses*, a publication that aimed to reach beyond Greenwich Village to capture the stories and readers in ”the most obscure American mill town or cross-roads village.”

In this paper, I examine how the editors and contributors of these three left-wing magazines (*The Masses*, *The Liberator*, and the *New Masses*) envisioned the politics and poetics of community. Through analyzing editorial statements and scrutinizing the selection and juxtaposition of art and literature as well as the layout and design, I demonstrate how each magazine conveyed not only an aesthetic vision but a philosophy of community. Although many of the board members carried over across the three magazines, each publication targeted a unique audience and fostered a distinctive political and aesthetic culture in dialogue with the historical transformations of the moment. While *The Masses* emphasized a global cooperative movement heavily influenced by European aesthetic trends and international political conversations, the *New Masses*, under the direction of Gold, endeavored to construct a distinctive American style, connecting Greenwich Village to villages around the country and integrating the voices of workers into the creative apparatus.

A writer and documentary filmmaker, **Jodie Childers** is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Tulane University. She produced *The Other Parade* which aired on RTÉ and co-directed *Down by the Riverside* which premiered at The Woodstock Film Festival. Her work has been published in *Comparative American Studies*, *Transatlantica*, *Resources for American Literary Studies*, *Appalachian Reckoning*, *The Journal of Working-Class Studies*, *Jacobin*, *U.S. Studies Online*, *Boulevard*, *Contested Commemoration*, and *The Hopkins Review*, among

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