

# Mary McCarthy and the Genealogy of Progressive Liberalism

JOHANNES VOELZ

In 1984, five years before her death, the novelist, short story writer, essayist, and critic Mary McCarthy published an essay in *The New York Times Book Review*, titled “The Lasting Power of the Political Novel.” Like much of her literary output, the essay has an autobiographical slant. It begins by telling the story of her sentimental and aesthetic education, the climax of which is a moment of awakening that is both political and literary. The climactic moment in question takes place during McCarthy’s senior year at Vassar College, in 1933, in an English class on “Contemporary Prose Fiction.” In the class, McCarthy and her fellow students become familiar with literary devices such as “multiplicity” and “stream of consciousness.” And along the way, the 21-year-old Mary McCarthy discovers her political consciousness. What makes her appreciation of both modernist aesthetics and political engagement come to life, flash-like, is her encounter with John Dos Passos’s novel *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*, which would later, by 1937, come to stand as the first volume of his trilogy *U.S.A.* She recalls, “No doubt the fervor of emotion – an incommunicable bookish delight – had been preparing in me for some time through other ‘social’ books.” But it wasn’t until she came upon *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* that her passion broke loose. “It was the Book of Lancelot for me” (McCarthy, “The Lasting Power”).

What did McCarthy find in Dos Passos’s book? On the one hand, she was taken with his modernist aesthetics, with the “unusual weaving of forms: the biographies, the newsreels, the Camera Eye (who was the author but treated in a wry, slightly embarrassed manner that I found very sympathetic), and finally the individual stories themselves. . .” (ibid.). Wrapped into her delight with these stories was the emergence of her political identity: “[The character] I most took to was Mac, who became a Wobbly or at any rate a socialist and was killed young. Best of all, I loved Debs, among the biographies, and disliked J. P. Morgan most.... I went to the library and looked up every line that Dos Passos had published that was in the card catalogue. I read them all. The last was a pamphlet on the Sacco-Vanzetti

case, which I found and read in the library basement, feeling tremendously stirred by Vanzetti's famous words, brand-new, of course, to me, and by the whole story. But we were in 1933, I realized, and they had been executed in 1927" (ibid.). From her stirring experience of reading Dos Passos, it was only a short step to her early career as a literary critic with the political commitments befitting the decade. "One thing leading to another, soon after graduation, I was writing little book reviews for *The New Republic*, then for *The Nation*, and I never looked back" (ibid.).

Dos Passos, by her own account, had turned the young McCarthy into a liberal, in the more or less precise meaning which this term carried from the 1910s through the 1930s, and which it has long since shed. At that time, identifying as a liberal meant being a progressive, oriented toward Marxism, committed to the vision of social reform. In the political landscape of the 1930s, it likely meant siding with Trotsky rather than Stalin, but even the Stalinist left sometimes claimed the term liberal. Not for nothing did several of the stories of McCarthy's first collection, *The Company She Keeps*, published in 1942, revolve around a fictional Stalinist magazine called – *The Liberal*. A choice of name that was, I think, only partially ironic.

Three decades after graduating from Vassar, in 1963, McCarthy published her bestselling novel *The Group* – a phenomenal commercial success that brought her fame, wealth, and plenty of scorn from her fellow New York intellectuals. In *The Group*, she revisits the site of her political and aesthetic awakening, Vassar College, by focusing on the lives of eight – or, at closer counting, nine – Vassar girls, a group of friends from the class of '33, who have just graduated, and now are off to put their Vassar-bred ambitions into practice, or not. At first sight, the novel is not concerned with politics. Yet indirectly, it reinterprets and reevaluates the liberalism of the 1930s. And it does so, curiously, by hanging on, in some crucial ways, to the model function of Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy, though what it appropriates from Dos Passos no longer corresponds to the young McCarthy's enthusiasm of the year 1933.

As I want to show in this essay, by looking closely at the literary aesthetics of McCarthy's *The Group*, and particularly at her engagement with Dos Passos, we can pick apart three layers of the meaning of liberalism – and, more specifically, progressive liberalism. These layers are, first, a commitment to progressive reform that puts its emphasis on the material conditions of collective life; second, a concern with the damaging effects of a standardized, consumer-oriented mass society; and third, a political investment in the goal of self-realiza-

tion, particularly for social groups that have been marginalized and discriminated against – in this particular case: women. Put on a chronological axis, these three meanings track three broad phases of the history of progressive liberalism in the twentieth-century US, and, indeed, in much of the West. I suggest that in *The Group*, the horizontal line of the chronological axis is tilted into a vertical axis of multiple, synchronous layers of meaning – a layering that is made possible by the thickness and ambiguity of literary language and its devices.

It is a layering of different degrees of presence and concreteness – with Raymond Williams we might speak of “the dominant, the residual, and the emergent” forms of meaning (*Marxism* 6). The “genealogy” of my title, then, does not primarily refer to a Foucauldian method, except insofar as Foucauldian genealogy, in the paraphrase of Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, “finds recurrences and play where others found progress and seriousness” (106). But more central to my conception of genealogy are theoretical models that approach historical change by looking at cross-sections of singular moments, with the hope of finding there multiple layers of sedimented meaning. What I’m attempting here, in other words, is closer to Raymond Williams’s idea of “structures of feeling” (see *Revolution* 48-71) and to Reinhart Koselleck’s notion of *sediments of time* (*Sediments of Time* 3-9; see also Voelz, “Histories”). What both Williams and Koselleck suggest is that the cross-section approach to historical meaning requires the aesthetic analysis of artworks, and particularly of literature. Why is this so? As I already said, and as is well-known, Williams conceptualizes the multiplicity of the historical cross-section as emergent, dominant, and residual layers of meaning; Koselleck, on the other hand, focuses on the synchronous layering of short-term events and long-term structures of recurrence. Both of these approaches depend on entities in which the multiplicities of history become condensed and take on form. For both thinkers, this is the offering of literature. My aim, then, is to perform a historical cross-section of Mary McCarthy’s *The Group*, with the objective of better understanding how what we usually think of as separate, consecutive stages in the history of left-progressive thought actually figure as layers that overlap and depend on each other.

On one level of analysis, it is justified to say that Mary McCarthy used *The Group* to inscribe herself into a literary-political lineage leading straight back to Dos Passos and his U.S.A. trilogy, which was widely regarded as a rueful testament to the squandered potentials of the labor movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Two characteristics support this view above all else. First, Dos Passos had opted for what has come to be referred to as the “collective novel”—a self-consciously anti-bourgeois literary genre, aimed to dethrone the bourgeois indi-

vidual by way of narrative technique. Dos Passos's trilogy features twelve principle characters and a host of additional minor ones. McCarthy, too, moves from individual heroines to a collective – in that sense, her title *The Group* is no less than a mission statement. Her roughly 350 pages focus on a circle of eight female friends, plus an additional out-group character from a competing circle of friends, in addition to a couple of mothers, fathers, husbands, sons, and lovers.

Secondly, and relatedly, McCarthy leans on Dos Passos regarding narrative voice. For Dos Passos, the anti-bourgeois program of decentering the individual heroine or hero entailed abolishing the boundaries of individual consciousness, as well as fusing the mind of the self with what he called, in the final line of his 1937 preface to the omnibus edition of the trilogy, “the speech of the people.” His preferred way of achieving this effect, at least in the main stories, was the employment of free indirect discourse, in which direct and indirect speech become fused so that it is no longer clear where the consciousness and language of the narrator end and those of the character begin. I'll say more about the significance of free indirect discourse for getting a cross-section view of *The Group* in a moment, but here I just want to make the point that in Dos Passos' initial framing, the use of this narrative device carries a populist appeal of sorts – as “the speech of the people.” So when McCarthy, throughout *The Group*, also employs free indirect discourse, it wouldn't be far-fetched to interpret this decision as a kind of homage to Dos Passos, both political and aesthetic.

McCarthy was only one prominent writer who referenced Dos Passos in the years following World War II. Norman Mailer, in his *The Naked and the Dead*, from 1948, was another. Doing so, they made a gesture of reaching back to thirties radicalism at a point in time when New Deal liberalism had been supplanted by cold war liberalism. By this point, the political landscape had drastically changed, and so had the meaning of liberalism. Many of those who had become radicalized during the 1930s had in the meantime turned anticommunist, and in turn had also rejected the term liberal, given the political commitments it evoked – until they ended up adopting it for their own outlook. Mary McCarthy certainly had clear anti-Stalinist convictions even throughout the thirties, and she kept up a fascination with Trotsky for much of her life. But she was also appalled by the swing to the right, in the early 1950s, by fellow anti-Stalinists like Sidney Hook and Max Eastman. With this context in mind, Mary McCarthy's tribute to Dos Passos in the fifties and early sixties becomes legible as a political position statement, a retroactive appraisal of a bygone vision of liberalism. In *The Group*, however, that vision is already shown to be in the process

of fading, as becomes apparent in the penultimate chapter, which pairs Priss and Norine, the two characters who had been most politicized during their student days. While Priss regrets that she has chosen motherhood over moving to DC, where she could have been “a humble cog in the New Deal” (325), Norine cries out: “You still believe in progress. ... No first rate mind can accept the concept of progress any more” (317).

But, I want to suggest, McCarthy’s return to the New Deal captures one layer of the novel’s approach to liberalism, and its commitment thereto. On a second level, *The Group* concerns itself with what we now associate with the cold war liberalism of the 1940s and 1950s – given its publication date of 1963, it’s even a bit of a late-comer. The themes and problems that concern McCarthy on this – what I would call *dominant* – level of the novel revolve around the standardization of language and thought and the systematic expunging of individuality in consumerist mass society. Interestingly, these concerns are already present in Dos Passos’s trilogy, and it’s no secret that they also concerned several *Partisan Review* writers, such as Dwight Macdonald in his two Soviet Cinema essays from 1938 and 1939, and Clement Greenberg, in his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.”

For Dos Passos, “the speech of the people” he announced in his preface turned out to be a far cry from the populist vernacular known from popular front novels like John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Dos Passos’s “speech of the people” is a language infiltrated by social tendencies of standardization and leveling that received a major push from the emerging profession of Public Relations, which features prominently throughout the trilogy. *Flatness* is what characterizes both the trilogy’s language and its characters. The effect is as ambiguous as the architecture of modernist housing projects: is this the world as envisaged by anti-bourgeois, socialist egalitarianism, or is it an instance of capitalist mass culture?

In *The Group*, McCarthy revisits this ambiguity, and, through her use of free indirect discourse, she pushes it towards disambiguation. With the exception of the first and the last, each of the chapters centers on one of the nine young women, turning her into the focalizer and rendering her perspective in free indirect style. As McCarthy explained at a public reading shortly after the novel’s release, her intent was not to give the reader access to the private minds of her characters, but, on the contrary, to show that every thought her characters entertained “was on the point of being turned into gossip” (Interview, 00:15:34 – 00:17:04). It is “as if each of these girls no longer had a private life” (ibid.). Indeed, group-talk blends into group-think. This, too, provides the novel’s title, *The Group*, with a programmatic meaning.

If the language of U.S.A. is expressive of both socialist egalitarianism and PR-driven standardization at once, the language of *The Group* is an exposé of chatter. It isn't that McCarthy slanders her characters as mindless automatons. Instead she shows them to obsessively compare themselves to others, which is why they fixate their attention on clothes, brands, and the signatures of outward behavior. She also shows them to be confirmation-seekers who go for the cliché any chance they get. Chapter 8, dedicated to Libby, the group's greatest chatterer, begins with the simple sentence, "Libby MacAusland had a spiffy apartment in the Village." That one adjective – spiffy – is the give-away that the narrator will let us in on a mind preoccupied with putting the slang of the moment into her thoughts and words. "Snazzy," "plu-perfect," "her latest flame," "comfy," "kerplunk" – it's easy to assemble whole lists of what McCarthy's first biographer Doris Grumbach calls the "verbal evidence" out which McCarthy makes the "Thirties rise up" (Grumbach 202). Plenty of critics – Norman Mailer, Norman Podhoretz and Pauline Kael among them – nonetheless didn't get it and blamed McCarthy for using clichéd language, as if that hadn't been the point.

In *The Group*, the full ramification of characters submerged in socialized language is brought home precisely through free indirect discourse. The device has traditionally been open to contrary usages, as Franco Moretti points out in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. "Placed as it is halfway between social doxa and the individual voice," Moretti writes, "free indirect style is a good indicator of their changing balance of forces" (82). The process can either take the direction from the socialized to the individualized – as when free indirect discourse merges into stream-of-consciousness, for instance in Joyce, or, for that matter, in Dos Passos' "Camera Eye" sections – or it can move in the opposite direction, toward ever more impersonalized forms that increasingly empty out individuality, as in *The Group*. The point McCarthy aims to drive home here is not that her characters ought to be blamed because they are spoiled, privileged snobs, but that, as she put it, "the vast growth of the social, steadily encroaching on both private and public life, has produced the eerie phenomenon of mass society" ("*Vita Activa*" 161). If this statement of McCarthy reminds you of her friend Hannah Arendt's ideas, it is because the quote is from McCarthy's admiring review of Arendt's *The Human Condition*. McCarthy wrote the review in 1958, as she was returning to *The Group*, and the resonance is hardly fortuitous.

But *The Group* has a third level of commitments, and here, McCarthy anticipates a new paradigm of progressive liberalism, which arguably continues into our day. McCarthy is not exactly known as a feminist because she never joined ranks with the feminist movement. But *The Group*, among many other things, is a revi-

sionary treatment of the “red decade” with the time stamp “early sixties” on it, and its revisionism brings into focus how women were taught to have grand ambitions in progressive colleges like Vassar, only to then find out that progressives best liked women in the home. There is a quasi-Foucauldian strain running through the book, which paints public and private institutions – and none more so than the hospital – as apparatuses of disciplinary power. One of the characters, Kay – who comes close to being the book’s central protagonist –, first gets beaten by her husband and then is committed by him to a mental ward (a scene that apparently echoes McCarthy’s own experience with her second husband, Edmund Wilson). Another group member, Priss, spends torturous weeks in the hospital after having given birth. Her husband, a pediatrician, puts her on a painful breastfeeding routine that is in line with his Republican politics, as opposed to feeding baby formula, which was coded as progressive. Even basic bodily self-determination hinges on her finding a sneaky ally in her nurse. “Home economics, apartment-decorating, cooking, contraception, fashion” (Grumbach 196) – these are the fields in which women are expected to gain expertise, and which turn out to be rather tightly regulated under the auspices of progressive reform. McCarthy’s characters have a choice: they can either give up the mythic Vassar ethos – which McCarthy, in her 1951 essay “The Vassar Girl,” had described as consisting of “the passion for public service coupled with a yearning for the limelight, a wish to play a part in the theatre of world events, to perform some splendid action that will cut one’s name in history like a figure eight in ice” (“Vassar Girl” 195). Or else they can consign themselves to living with an unhappy consciousness – as the members of *The Group* almost invariably end up doing. But the core of the Vassar ethos and ambition retains its normative force throughout the novel. The scandal of *The Group* is not what the women chatter about, scandalous though they may find it. The scandal is that they are confined to an existence of chatter, and ultimately to a Betty Friedan-like state of depression. The novel ends, after all, with Kay’s funeral, after she has fallen out of the window of the Vassar club, in what may or may not have been a suicidal act.

Coming back to McCarthy’s 1984 essay with which I opened this essay, we recognize that she herself recognized the feminist potential of her book: “Maybe novels about the lot of women, such as *A Lost Lady*, were ‘domestic’ at the time of writing, but they have been drafted into the service of feminism, along with their modern sisters, *Fear of Flying*, and *The Group*” (“The Lasting Power”). Put succinctly, then, the novel contains a third, emergent, layer of interpreting, and committing to, progressive liberalism: one that pushes for self-realization of the members of those social groups who have been stifled and sidelined. Let me put the

cross-section analysis of *The Group's* engagement with liberalism in a single sentence, then: In writing a novel that revisits *New Deal liberalism*, McCarthy ends up singling out the concerns with mass-culture characteristic of *cold war liberalism* and ties it to a program of self-realization that would come to pre-occupy the next generation of *progressive liberals*, down to this very day. To my mind, this genealogy has implications that would make many progressives uncomfortable, for it would imply that such a cross-section view isn't afforded only by McCarthy's novel. Maybe their own political commitments also contain layers of progressive liberalism that they would rather disavow, particularly in a historical moment in which being a progressive is defined against being a liberal.

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## About the Author

Johannes Voelz is Professor of American Studies at Goethe-University Frankfurt. He is the author, most recently, of *Poetics of Insecurity: American Fiction and the Uses of Threat* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). He is currently completing a monograph on the aesthetics of populism.



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