

Theodore Dreiser, Sergei Dinamov, and the Limits of the “Social” [Moscow, 14 May 2021]

NB SEE PHILIP FISHER CHAPTER ON AAT IN ‘HARD FACTS’ WHERE HE OBSERVES THAT ‘NOWHERE IN DREISER’S NOVEL IS THERE THERE THE SLIGHTEST TRACE OF SOCIETY, A THAT WORD IS UNDERSTOOD IN 19C NOVELS. INSTEAD THERE ARE WORLDS...IN THE CITY ALL AURA IS TRANSLATED INTO PLACES, ... PLACES SUPPLANT MANNERS. IN COMMUNITIES, IN SOCIETIES, MANNERS WERE THE CODES OF BEHAVIOR, OFTEN MOST PRECISE IN SPEECH AND LANGUAGE, ENCODING DEFERENCE OR INTIMACY, CODES OF BEHAVIOR THAT ENACT THE RULES OF PRESENCE, THE WAY IN WHICH WE ENTER OR SITUATE OURSELVES IN EACH OTHER’S EXPERIENCES. PLACES IN DREISER GIVE OUT THIS SOCIAL GRAMMAR ONCE LOCATED IN BEHAVIOR, IN MANNERS, IN THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONDUCT.

ZOLA WAS THE FIRST TO ABANDON SOCIETY AS THE OBJECT OF PUBLIC REPRESENTATION FOR A NEW POST-SOCIAL TOPIC OF “WORLDS”.....[SEE BLOOM NATURALISM ANTHOLOGY P. 227]

RELATE THIS TO CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION BY HOWELLS - SENSE THAT AMERICA LACKED SOCIETY AND THAT IS A DEFICIT (AND ERIC ON ‘PROPIQUITY’) ON THE ONE HAND, AND ON THE OTHER HAND OLD BRUNO LATOUR AND THERE NEVER WAS SUCH A THING AS SOCIETY. AND CHICAGO SCHOOL SOCIOLOGY??

Yet Again, Susan Mizruchi offers a genealogy of naturalism based on the relative deployment of the “natural” and the social: “where Norris’s naturalism tends to corroborate a social evolutionary scheme, Dreiser’s naturalism, by showing how such a scheme justifies and entrenches a man-made social system, tends to challenge it.” (Susan Mizruchi, 203).

The literary critic Sergei Sergeevitch Dinamov (1901-39) initially approached Theodore Dreiser by letter in December 1926, introducing himself as a great admirer, and promising that “you will find in me one of your best friend[s] in Russia” (Dec 10 1926, 1). There ensued a decade-long relationship that largely fulfilled Dinamov’s hopes for a cross-cultural dialogue, both through their letters, in which they discussed Dreiser’s views on literary, philosophical and political topics, and through the leading role that Dinamov played in the dissemination and interpretation of Dreiser’s work in Russia. (Just one of an astounding range of achievements crammed into Dinamov’s relatively short career – I do not have time to do justice to that here.)

Dinamov’s engagement with Dreiser is of considerable historical interest, prompting consideration of what knowledges American literature could be called upon to communicate to a constituency of readers who viewed the United States from the outside, as a model of a possible modernity, whether positively or negatively. But it is not only in Russia that Dreiser has been identified as an exemplary American writer, and Dinamov’s reading of Dreiser throws light on longstanding debates over literary naturalism and his alleged determinism.

In this paper then I will first gesture towards what I think Dinamov saw in Dreiser. Acknowledging my dependence on sources in English, this will be speculative and deferential. Then I will go on to relate Dinamov’s thinking to Dreiser’s reputation in the USA, particularly in relation to ideas of society and the social as evoked in literature. Finally I will briefly suggest how these considerations might add to our understanding of the category of the “social” in Dreiser’s work.

Dinamov’s view of Dreiser was dualistic. On the one hand it was celebratory.

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Yet Dinamov was also highly critical of Dreiser's work, reflecting conflicts and debates in their correspondence, which was characterised by Dinamov's forbearance with what he called Dreiser's "sweet temperament laden with dynamite" (Jul 18 1935, 1). Dinamov's literary enthusiasm for Dreiser was tempered with major political reservations. For all his continual championing of Dreiser as the best and most important American novelist, and in spite of their friendship, Dinamov was highly critical of the political position he discerned in Dreiser's work. Sending his Preface to *Twelve Men*, for example, Dinamov wrote, "Believe me, Dreiser, I have written some words here with pain of my heart." (Sept 11 1928, 1). That pain was mainly caused by the conclusion, repeated in several of his writings, that Dreiser's work was irredeemably "petit bourgeois." Rather than indicating a concern with individuals of a particular class, Dinamov meant that Dreiser's narratives reflected the experience of a class in historical decline, whose members expected to exercise some measure of social agency, but found that they were after all unable to do so. This was to render in the terminology of a certain Soviet form of Marxist literary theory, the sense of human beings isolated and constrained by historical and environmental forces, that has been so influenced Dreiser's critical reputation and that is summed up by the term "naturalism". (For the sake of clarity, it is also worth mentioning that "naturalism" was also a key term in that Marxist critical discourse, it meant something somewhat different and it was rarely applied to Dreiser.)

But this "translation" makes an important difference. What was at stake for many American critics was Dreiser's emphasis on the limitations of *individual* agency, which they rightly recognized as being at odds with a dominant national ideology of possessive individualism. For Dinamov however,, steeped in Russian and English literary traditions, this was a central and familiar literary theme. Moreover, as a Soviet critic he regarded such efforts as futile at best in their attempts to mitigate the effects of capitalism. What bothered Dinamov was what he saw as Dreiser's foreclosure of the dimension of the social, as a sphere, arena or field, in which any meaningful transformative human activity could take place. As Dinamov put it in a Preface he wrote for the Russian edition of Dreiser's "Twelve Men"

Facing actualities, Dreiser before all sees in them a special individual, a human being, - characteristically, in the novels *Jennie Gerhardt*, *Sister Carrie*, *The Titan*, *The Financier*, *The "Genius"*. His path is from the individual to the substance. He is not a social novelist. Or rather, he is social only to the extent that his hero is connected with the society, with the epoch. ("Dreiser's *Twelve Men*" [1928] translator unknown, UP f1530, 1)

Not immediately clear what D is getting at, or even whether he approves or not.

First relate it to American tradition. Especially Rahv. [[note parallel with how Rahv identifies a similar quality – quotation below. And Fisher also reads Clyde Griffiths this way – as archetype....]]
Contradictions in Bloom. How to resolve this. D as

Then propose reading it in context via IL - Could read it via marx and Engels being translated and published in IL (see below)

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What is it that gave Dinamov “pain of my heart” about this? I suggest it is because, for him, ultimately “society” has in Dreiser become coterminous with historical determination, “the epoch.” This means that Dreiser cannot simply be read as demonstrating the failure of American materialism, but of negating the possibility of transformative collective action. For Dinamov “society” is defined most powerfully not in opposition to the notion of the individual, but in relation to history, or historical conditions. The foreclosure of this dimension was what marked Dreiser’s fiction as “petit bourgeois.”

Elsewhere, in the 1927 Preface to the Russian Edition of *The Titan*, probably written in collaboration with Ruth Kennell, Dinamov extended this critique to Dreiser’s depiction of women.

“He does not see women as workers, as social agents, as comrades of men. He sees them only as women – as mistresses, as females, as hunters for men” (6).

In the Russian context, perhaps, what is distinctive about Dinamov’s view of Dreiser is that he retained this view of Dreiser’s work even after Dreiser became an overt and very public supporter of Soviet Communism in 1930. In his landmark 1931 essay “Theodore Dreiser is Coming Our Way,” published in the multi-lingual *International Literature*, Dinamov emphasized the political distance Dreiser had travelled *since* writing his novels – and the suddenness of the transformation from “spokesman of the petty bourgeoisie” to “revolutionary publicist” (127).

I understand that this very much went against the grain of Dreiser’s growing reputation in Russia, where his fiction tended to be read retrospectively, through the lens of his later Communist affiliation.

[[Dinamov handled these dualities, one could speculate, via the tradition of Marx and Engels’ ideas on literature that he was printing for the first time as editor in chief of the journal *Internatsional’naya literatura (International Literature)*. There’s something here that looks forward to the developments of the Marxist literary thinking associated with Georg Lukács’s elaboration of the distinction between a reductive naturalism and classical realism with its multifaceted representation of “society...as a complex of vital and contradictory relationships between human beings” (“Tolstoy and the Development of Realism,” 285). In addition, it is clear that Dinamov is indicating an attenuation of the social dimension in Dreiser’s fiction, such that individuals face the material world of “actualities” and “substance” directly, without the mediation of something like community or collectivity. In many respects this anticipates the sensitivity of many critics over the last forty or so years to Dreiser’s direct depiction of the relations between humans and things, exemplified in a range of critical idioms by Philip Fisher, Rachel Bowlby, Stanley Corkin, Walter Benn Michaels, and others. Closest to Dinamov’s perspective are writers influenced by the Marxist tradition, such as Fredric Jameson, who described the structure of human subjectivity depicted in Dreiser’s fiction as “the closed monad...the newly centered subject of the age of reification” (*Political Unconscious*, 160), and Bill Brown, who sees Dreiser’s depiction of rich and poor as subjected to “the absolute sameness that defines the human condition within consumer culture” (“The Matter of Dreiser’s Modernity,” 84). Yet all of these critics regard American modernity, and Dreiser’s depiction of it, as dualistic. The loss of social agency is offset by the “triumph of American materialism” (in James B. Twitchell’s phrase), an expansion of the cultural, psychological, and other affectivities of the material. This new dispensation, dominated by the category of the individual, its composition and its relations, is symbolically ushered in by the intertwining narratives of rising star Carrie Meeber and falling man George Hurstwood in Dreiser’s first novel. Carrie thrives in a modern urban economy

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based on commodification, consumption and performance, While Hurstwood is doomed by his inability to keep up appearances by his inability to In contrast to Carrie's , with its intertwining narratives of rising-star Carrie Meeber, trapped in a cycle of desire, temporary fulfilment, and dissatisfaction, and falling-man George Hurstwood. In this , the social has become so all-encompassing as to be practically meaningless.]]

But there also symmetries with American literary criticism's own handling of questions of the "social". For example, decades before Dinamov was writing, William Dean Howells, then the most influential literary critic in America, was arguing that American literature was not good at depicting the "social" dimension because, well, it hardly existed in the USA.

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"In most American novels the people are segregated if not sequestered, and the scene is sparsely populated [...] Perhaps it is for this reason that we excel in small pieces with three or four figures, or in studies of rustic communities, where there is propinquity if not society. Our grasp of more urbane life is feeble; most attempts to assemble it in our pictures are failures, possibly because it is too transitory, too intangible in its nature with us, to be truthfully represented as really existent."

William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (1891)

'Propinquity rather than society' – as good a formulation of American exceptionalism as any; the dimension of the social, without the existence of society

Not that this was entirely a bad thing, Howells argued from his position as editor of Harpers Monthly. A powerful sense of the "social" was what underwrote snobbery and hierarchy in England, and the institution of slavery in the US – slavery as a produce of white racial solidarity.

This problem gives rise to/is exemplified by the two overlapping meanings that the term 'society' and the 'social' have in Dreiser's fiction.

Another twist of the kaleidoscope, and similar terms came into play in the critical backlash against Dreiser in the American 1940s and 1950s spearheaded by Lionel Trilling and New Criticism. Critics such as Philip Rahv and Malcolm Cowley can be seen as inverting Dinamov's argument – where he had seen NO social dimension in Dreiser, they see ONLY the social dimension:

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- Philip Rahv, "To the naturalist, human behavior is a function of its social environment" "[i]n such a closed world [of Dreiser's Cowperwood novels and *An American Tragedy*] there is patently no room for the singular, the unique, for anything in fact which cannot be represented plausibly as the product of a particular social and historical complex." ("On the Decline of Naturalism," *Partisan Review* 9 [1942])
- Malcolm Cowley, [Literary "On the Decline of Naturalism." *Partisan Review* 9 (1942): 483-93 naturalism is concerned with] "human behavior and with explanations for that behavior in terms of heredity or environment"; "the exterior world" not "the world within." "Naturalism does not deal primarily with individuals in themselves, but rather with social groups or settings or movements, or with individuals [...] who are regarded as being typical of a group" ("Not Men': A Natural History of American Naturalism," *Kenyon Review* 9 [1947])
- *Fisher picking up and developing further this sense of 'worlds'.*

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- Harold Bloom, "...Dreiser's own tendency to identify reality with existent institutions, and to assume that reality is entirely social in its nature." (*American Naturalism* [2004]).

These are of course astoundingly **inattentive** readings of Dreiser's fiction – collapsing the multiple layers of explanatory discourse in his novels into one vast undifferentiated category of the "social." Cite famous *Financier* lobster and squid exegesis. Which is not so much to score interpretive points as to suggest that they might be a little ideologically motivated.

Epilogue

So, how does a sense of all of this help us to read Dreiser?

Close with one observation. The "social", in Dreiser, just like Dinamov's reading of Dreiser, is inherently dualistic. Dreiser uses the term to mean **both**

- (1) something like "the general realm of human interactions" - an enveloping field of experience and relations, often associated with urban life – that we are perhaps most familiar with in *Sister Carrie* and
- (2) the sense of a social elite – a "society" from which one can be excluded, or, like Frank Cowperwood in the *Trilogy of Desire* spent a lifetime seeking to enter.

While conceptually distinct, what always complicates them, in Dreiser's fiction, I would suggest, is that while the elite take social agency for granted, from outside the elite social agency appears to be almost impossible – so that "society" signifies both the possibility of agency and the exclusion from that possibility.

This play of meaning is central to the Cowperwood trilogy – which, not surprisingly perhaps, - Dinamov regarded as Dreiser's best work.

THE END

What Dinamov meant by arguing that Dreiser "is not a social novelist" is of central importance, but is not immediately clear. The term the "social novel" meant very different things even to Dreiser's contemporaries William Dean Howells and Frank Norris, and still other things to later critics such as Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe, who respectively eviscerated and celebrated Dreiser for producing it. Dinamov's use of the term may have been gesturing towards the detailed representations of human interactions for which Henry James and Edith Wharton are famous; or more likely, he may have meant to suggest the focus on social issues evident in the work of writers such as Upton Sinclair. To a certain extent he may be seen as anticipating In any case,

Editor-in-chief of il a major institution of Soviet cultural diplomacy. Among his prolific output of critical essays and monographs were discussions of writers as diverse as Brockden Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, Galsworthy, Wells, and Shakespeare. Gaining an understanding of the latter, he told Dreiser, had cost him a two-year struggle. When Dreiser somewhat provocatively questioned Shakespeare's relevance to the lives of Russian proletarians, Dinamov defended his critical project as being "not dead and scholastic but living like the smell of violets" (Dinamov to TD, Oct 26 1933, 2).