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## Race

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# Race

It has been virtually impossible to discuss the question of the treatment of popular music and popular culture in Ragtime apart from dealing with the issue of race. Questions such as what is American music, what is its character and origin, who participated in its shaping, who promoted it with what priorities, what piece by what composer deserved a Broadway production and what the subsequent review of the piece was like, all these were, in one way or another, permeated by the issue of race. I would go as far as to say that if one were to look for a single common denominator underlying all the above questions, race would be the undisputed candidate. Not that it would be a major discovery: the question's prominence secured its ultimate standing in the American mind and society right at the moment of the arrival of the first slave ships to the American shores.

Much of what I have claimed in the preceding chapter has been an attempt to develop certain latent themes of Ragtime, locating them in their historical and cultural contexts, partly a close reading combined with added historical information, partly an attempt to read between the lines and hint at some possible implications of the choice of the musical style as a unifying metaphor of both the novel and the era it portrays. Most of the points I have made (the importance of ragtime, the personality of Scott Joplin) were not explicitly made in the work. Yet I do hope that the additional historical background has shed some more light on how the novel operates and what it means in the context of the American culture of the 20th century.

In this chapter, on the other hand, I want to discuss the parts of Ragtime where the question of race is treated explicitly. Later I will try to focus on to what an extent this dominant issue is reflected in Dos Passos' 42nd Parallel as well as in the whole trilogy. Once again, I suppose that such a comparison might illuminate how the representation of the American reality – as exemplified by the two writers with markedly leftist sympathies – has been developing from the interwar period through our post-modern times.

## **Racism and Radical Resistance: Coalhouse Walker Jr.**

Right at the beginning, on the second page of *Ragtime*, Doctorow opens with a largely ironical description of the turn of the century social situation, stating that "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants." (R 4) In so doing he foreshadows the role both these groups are assigned in the text: not only did the Negroes and immigrants exist, but also have been put very much in the foreground of the narrative. From among the explicit instances when characters of color occur and racial issues are voiced in the book, the story of Coalhouse Walker Jr. is by far the most dominant one. What has started as a broad depiction, a kind of panorama, of the whole society, delivered through a variety of narrative strands, abruptly changes with Coalhouse's appearance on the scene. All the strands suddenly converge into one – Coalhouse's tragic fight for justice.

The dignified, self-confident behavior of the black musician and his relatively good economic standing strikes all the white characters he meets. Younger Brother, full of admiration, is attracted to him, Father is genuinely puzzled and the poor working-class whites in the city quarters through which Coalhouse passes in his new Model T to pay his weekly visits to Sarah are inevitably enraged. The whole composition of his personality – manner of speech, quality of dress, car – represents a provocative trespassing of the boundary of what is still tolerable for a member of his race in the eyes of the white majority.

Arthur Salzman draws an apt comparison between the position of Coalhouse and another artist in the novel, Tateh. Commenting on Tateh's rise both in the movie industry and – thanks to his newly created identity – also on the social scale, he goes on to discuss the position of the black pianist. "The Negro, no matter how qualified or well-mannered he may become, can only hope to be tolerated as a second class citizen in White America. In fact, because the system of justice is designed to protect the ruling class, thereby ceasing to function when a Negro seeks to share in its benefits, not even second-class status can be guaranteed him. Ironically, Coalhouse Walker's personal talent and dignity, his stylishness and quiet bearing, mark him as "uppity"; vandalizing his car is not just a joke on the part of the volunteer firemen, it is also a lesson in reality." (Trenner 95) In other words, unlike Tateh, Coalhouse is denied the possibility of "re-constructing himself anew," to leave the confining space assigned to his race and "point his life along the flow of American energy." What is possible for a Jewish immigrant with an accent is not possible for a black American. The space within "the flow" is reserved for the white majority, the racial division of the society runs deeper than that based on class or ethnic origin: "It seemed like such a foolish thing to have happened. It seemed to be his fault, somehow, because he was a Negro and it was the kind of problem that would only adhere to a Negro.

His monumental negritude sat in front of them [the New Rochelle family] like a centerpiece on the table.”(R 193)

The “lesson in reality” Coalhouse is given triggers off a fatal chain of events. The damaged and soiled Model T becomes a symbol of the impossibility of finding redress and its condition further deteriorates parallelly with Coalhouse’s vain attempts to apply all legal means to reclaim it in its original state. By the time the car ends up at the bottom of the pond outside the fire station, Coalhouse’s musical career is abandoned, his marriage postponed, and the only remaining channel of finding redress lies in the exercise of raw power outside the boundaries of law. Yet power is what the system rests on: where Coalhouse can muster a handful of young black radicals, the system has the whole police department and all the state troopers of New York at its disposal.

By depicting the death of Walker’s fiancé Sarah, who had been shot while trying to approach the vice-president in the hope of putting forward an appeal on Coalhouse’s part, Doctorow voices his bitter indictment of the all-pervading violence of American life in general and the violence of the establishment in particular. If the system itself relies on the exercise of brutal force, then a principled resistance must necessarily also resort to violent forms. To illustrate this, the narrator gives us the following insight into Sarah’s mind: “She had perhaps detected the violence underlying all principle.” (R 196) One might doubt the generality of the statement, but as Doctorow sees the American society, for a principled Black person violence appears indeed inevitable.

As already indicated, the character of Coalhouse, his uncompromising position and subsequent resort to terrorism enables Doctorow to go deeper – by means of portraying the other characters’ attitudes to Coalhouse’s actions – into the minds of the involved protagonists, in particular the New Rochelle family. The Coalhouse affair further opens the cracks in the relationship between Mother and Father and completely alienates Younger Brother, who joins Coalhouse’s group and provides the necessary know-how of handling explosives for their terrorist assaults. Father adopts a pragmatic, somewhat morally flexible, yet essentially well-meaning position. “He said it was ridiculous to allow a motorcar to take over everyone’s life as it now had.(...) I will simply bribe them to repair the car and return it to my door. I will pay them money. I will bribe them off. Mr. Walker would not like that, Mother said.” (R 197) Unlike her husband Mother has realized the symbolic value the car has already attained. Mother’s Younger Brother went even further in denouncing Father’s stance: “You speak like a man who has never been tested in his principles.” (R 193) In this way the split of the New Rochelle family – much precipitated by the Coalhouse episode – comes to exemplify another characteristic feature of American society: the permanent tension between a “down-to-earth” pragmatism and a “high” idealism.

The Coalhouse episode has been accused of being anachronistic on grounds that it transplants the 1960s black radicalism into the progressive times, which is, so the critics say, an obvious historical nonsense. As another example of the same "offence" one might mention the conversation of Coalhouse Walker with Booker T. Washington (not accidentally taking place in the marble setting of the Morgan library, full of imported European cultural artefacts). This encounter echoes the 1960s debate between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. ("The educator closed his eyes and locked his hands in his lap. Oh Lord, he said, lead my people to the Promised Land.") (R. 295) This critique goes in one line with similar charges by the group of critics who accused Doctorow of historical inaccuracy. Paul Levy, for instance, in his 1976 essay "Historical Truth v Fiction" complains that *Ragtime* makes fiction out of history, that is, it falsifies history." For him the "celebrities simply did not perpetrate the grotesqueries they are made to commit on its pages." (Levy 21-24) A true enough charge but only provided one believes in the possibility of the very concept of objective historical evaluation. This does not seem to be Doctorow's case and *Ragtime* illustrates that. In the essay "False Documents", where he discusses the nature of history and the importance of fiction for our understanding of the world, Doctorow reveals his deep scepticism as far as the notion of historical truth is concerned. For him "historical accuracy" is just a chimera, a sheer impossibility, a false document. "Novelists know explicitly that the world in which we live is still to be formed and that reality is amenable to any construction that is placed upon it. It is a world made of liars and we are born liars." (Doctorow in Trenner 26), he says at one point of the essay. The same of course, applies to history: "History is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory." (Doctorow in Trenner 25) In this light the novel can be seen as an attempt to demystify history, "to promote a new historical self-consciousness." (Parks 62)

In other words, if a writer believes that "all history is contemporary history, and is written and rewritten from one generation to another," (Doctorow in Trenner 24), how could he – writing in the mid-seventies about the racial situation around the turn of the century – bracket out his historical knowledge of developments that followed the Progressive Era? Our understanding of the debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois will always be influenced by what we know about the 1960s conflict between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Similarly it is impossible to exclude the 1960s' radicalism of the Black Panthers or the current standing of the Nation of Islam if one tries to interpret the racial problems prior to World War I. Indeed, more recent historical events do shed their light on earlier ones, our evaluations of certain personalities and incidents get modified in the course of time as we find out more about their im-

pact. This seems to be the point Doctorow is making by introducing Coalhouse's "anachronistic" character.

In short, Ragtime is not a realistic novel. The whole narrative can be read as a statement about the impossibility – or false pretensions – of realism. The critics who reproach Doctorow on grounds that his novel is not "true" thus fall into a double misunderstanding. In a sense Ragtime is NOT about Coalhouse, the Progressive era, history as a fact – in which case it is irrelevant to demand historical plausibility – it is about how history is written or "composed."

Doctorow may be sceptical about the attainability of a true historical account but he does not abandon social critique. As we have already seen, his novel is permeated with an incessant effort to draw the readers' attention to what he regards as social injustice in the U.S. society. From among the abuses Doctorow chose to expose, racism stands very much in the foreground. This is apparent not only thanks to the Coalhouse episode and the way it was handled. In addition to this particularly dramatic conflict, Doctorow also offers other depictions of racism in American society. For instance the character of Father, a typical representative of the progressive white middle-class opinions, values and tastes, is often used for this purpose. His attitude toward the Eskimos – people with a different racial and cultural background – has been extensively treated in the chapter devoted to the problems of the social construction of the body. Likewise, Father's limited knowledge of as well as preconceptions about black music have already been mentioned. In this context, one more revealing insight should be added. At one point in the book Doctorow characterizes Father: "He's always thought of himself as progressive. He believed in the perfectibility of the republic. He thought, for instance, there was no reason the Negro could not with proper guidance carry every burden of human achievement." (R 239) The deeply rooted racism of such a position is now hopefully self-evident. It is in similar ironic probes into the characters' minds that Doctorow, once again, achieves a high level of mastery.

## **The Limits of Vision: John Dos Passos**

In the preceding chapter it has been pointed out that like Doctorow, Dos Passos was not blind to the importance of popular culture. However, unlike his successor, Dos Passos interprets it in a different way. This different view of what popular culture means and how it operates in the society reflects the prevalent view of the phenomenon among intellectuals during Dos Passos' times: his attitude toward popular culture was shared by many an influential modernist writer Dos Passos was inspired by.

If it is not possible to accuse Dos Passos of blindness toward the popular, there is nevertheless an enormous gap in his "chronicle of American life" one feels obliged to accuse him of: Dos Passos appears to have been color-blind. Yet again, one should not move so fast. This color-blindness fits into a larger framework of evasion of the issue on the part of a substantial section of the white intellectual establishment during and after Dos Passos' times. From the triumvirate of issues that have gained a deserved attention in academia in the course of the 20th century, particularly in its second half, i.e. the questions of class, race and gender, Dos Passos' obvious favorite is that of class; he partly touches on the issue of gender and almost totally ignores that of race. Indeed, to use the opening lines of Ragtime again, there are virtually no negroes (and immigrants) in the world of the 42nd Parallel. On the 387 paperback pages of the first part of the trilogy, we can find only one brief comment on the racial situation in the United States, a tiny drop in the ocean of a panorama that otherwise constitutes quite a representative view of the American reality. Right at the beginning of Janey's narrative, when she is still quite small, the author offers an account of the following formative experience on the part of the Georgetown girl. Janey had invited one of her friends, a girl named Pearl, to her house. After the girl leaves, Janey's "mommer" asks her not to invite Pearl anymore. The scene is particularly effective because the narrator has not, up to the moment of the conversation, disclosed the race of the little visitor.

*"...but you must never associate with colored people on an equal basis. Living in this neighborhood it's all the more important to be careful about those things.... Neither the whites nor blacks respect those who do ....That's all, Janey, you understand; now run out and play, it'll soon be time for your supper."*

The short passage gives a realistic description of how prejudice is created, inherited from one generation to the next, and how the racial segregation is maintained, both in the space of the mind and in the space of the city. The scene also represents one of the countless formative moments out of which Janey's naive, unquestioning and self-conscious personality comes into existence. However, as far as the question of race is concerned, this is where Dos Passos stops. Unlike in Doctorow's "historical account", there is no major character of ethnic origin, no major conflict in the book revolves around the issue of race.

Given the degree of Dos Passos' education, his knowledge of history and literature (Mark Twain's classic Huckleberry Finn comes almost automatically to mind) his deep awareness of the social, political, cultural and artistic developments of the day, it would be extremely hard to assume that he could have been unaware of the underlying nature of the problem of race in the United States.

There were far too many developments on the racial front so as not to be noticed by a person of only a fraction of Dos Passos' intellect and education.

It is quite strange for an author of Dos Passos' stature not to take any notice of the U.S.' second-class citizens whose right to vote was virtually non-existent in the South, people subjected to a strict regime of segregation, innocent targets of racial prejudice and hatred and, in a worse case, victims of the Ku-Klux-Klan or lynch mobs. The world he set out to depict was marked by discriminatory practices following the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in 1896, it was a world where "scientific" studies were carried out proving the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race. On the other hand, the American society of Dos Passos' formative years already offered a much needed corrective to the prevalent, "common-sensical" racism, as voices opposing the dominant discourse became increasingly articulate, radical and noticeable. A new black intellectual elite gathered around the formidably sophisticated figure of W.E.B. Du Bois, historian, theoretician and political leader. Du Bois' seminal series of essays Souls of Black Folk - where he defines the ultimate problem of the American society as that of the color line - appeared as early as 1903. The study of this volume alone would have yielded both an entirely new perspective and wealth of promising material to the author of the U.S.A., an artist who was obviously out to paint a possibly broad and representative canvas of his society and at the same time condemn so many of its facets! Yet Dos Passos ignored this splendid opportunity.

Obviously, one might argue that Dos Passos is not alone in leaving out characters of color. Truly enough, many acclaimed white authors of the day - Hemingway, Fitzgerald, just to name two very popular ones - largely avoided African-Americans or recent immigrants as material for their fictions. I am very much aware of the danger of criticising authors for not dealing with an issue - there will always be omissions and potentially crucial themes that are left out because other things were written about instead. Thus I certainly do not think that counting characters according to their color, class or perhaps even sexual orientation and demanding a "proper" or "balanced" representation of a society in a text is useful in any respect. Nevertheless, Dos Passos' trilogy is a different matter: while the individual projects on the part of a Fitzgerald, Hemingway were much more limited in scope, another measure must be applied in the case of somebody who regarded himself a "chronicler" of American life, an author whose ambition was that "everything was to go in." (Pizer 30) In this case, I believe, one might, with some justification, demand something more in the way of a balanced representation of American society.

To provide a definitive explanation for the lack of representation of African-Americans in the trilogy is not easy. In fact it is hardly possible. Nevertheless, I will make several attempts at an explanation of this significant lack. The expla-

nations permeate one another in many respects and the most plausible version could probably be found in the combination of all the below hypotheses.

Perhaps, after all, Dos Passos was too much of a child of his time to be able to see – or deeply worry about – the racial injustice inherent in the society. It is generally known that most people in the 1920s were convinced that “races vary greatly in innate intelligence and temperament.” (Gosset 373) This “commonsensical” view of the day was supported by what was then regarded as “objective” and “disinterested” research. If Dos Passos had held a similar conviction, then the second-class citizenry on the part of the African-Americans was not so much a case of racial injustice but rather a “natural” way the society was to be structured and run, offering the author little material for critique.

Another possible reason for the gap might be the lack of first hand experience. It is well-known that many characters and incidents go back to real-life people Dos Passos had met. Having heard their life-stories, Dos Passos then transformed them into his narratives. Dos Passos' Mac, for instance, is modelled after Gladwin Bland, a former IWW radical whom Dos Passos met during his brief stay in Mexico in the winter of 1926–27, the character of J. Ward Moorehouse was inspired by the publicist Ivy Lee whom Dos Passos happened to meet two years later in Moscow. It has been established that the fictional portraits are fairly close to their real-life models. Thus, even if it appears rather unlikely, Dos Passos may have avoided the issue because of a lack of personal experience. Should this possibility be true, it would only serve as a case in point that America, indeed, consists of two nations, albeit different from those of Dos Passos: a person who happens to be born into the right “nation” can live in an utterly racist society without experiencing any racism, without even noticing it is there.

For yet another explanation of Dos Passos' avoidance of the issue of race we might return to the beginning: we have seen what is lacking, what is marginalized and what is at the center of Dos Passos' narrative. Dos Passos shares with the Marxists a view of social reality predominantly dominated by the notion of class; questions of gender and race are of secondary importance. Class struggle is certainly one of the major themes of the novel. His definition of class might not be the same as Marx<sup>1</sup>, but like Marx he sees society as consisting of two distinct groups.

*I was trying to divide all humanity into the useful people like cooks and farmhands and woodworkers and architects and engineers, who were always building up mankind, and the destructive people like politicians and bankers and college presidents and national propagandists, who spread illusions and caused wars and destroyed civilisation as fast as the producers built it up. Black was black and white was white. Producers were good, exploiters*

*were evil. Myself and my friends I classed with the producers.* (emphasis mine) (Dos Passos in Clark 125)

The tone of the interview, which was given later in Dos Passos' life, already suggests a kind of ironical distance from his earlier black-and-white (a significant color metaphor in this context!) vision of the world, a deeper awareness of the existence of grey in human society, the complexity of its relationships and ambiguity of its values. Although the trilogy is much less naive than Dos Passos' distancing remarks would suggest, it is indeed marked by a certain unquestioning black-and-white view of the society. The sole focus on the split between the "useful" and "destructive" people appears to have had a particularly blinding effect on the author. His excessive concentration on "producers" who are pitted against "propagandists" does not enable him to notice the race of the people. Since most of the attention is paid to imagery of class and also class struggle, the other possible lines of privilege drawn between people are unfortunately ignored.

If this explanation is correct, then it might be used for a demonstration of how confining and intellectually limiting a single way of viewing reality always is. The grave danger of being virtually blinded by a single ideology is unfortunately not only limited to Marxism. Thus what every culture needs in order to avoid such peril is an ongoing critical debate not only about its literature, but – more importantly – about its values, priorities, mode of existence. Vital for such a critical self-reflection is also the role of intellectuals, provided they retain a substantial amount of caution and a healthy dose of scepticism. If they do meet this difficult requirement – a no easy task, as we can see from Dos Passos' example – they can try to cut down on the number of blind spots of their society, reminding their fellow-citizens that reality is richer, more complex – and more dangerous – than it is currently held to be.

However, to return to Dos Passos' novel, it may not be Dos Passos' excessive concentration on class that accounts for his avoidance of the issue of race, after all. Perhaps – and here we are led back to the proximity of square one – what we are confronted with is a much more general phenomenon, a specifically white American blindness. It is striking that a close look at the numerous books by American scholars dealing with the trilogy reveals the same telling gap. For instance in the relatively recent and probably most comprehensive study on the U.S.A. Donald Pizer says about the work's representativeness:

*It might be expected that Dos Passos would use the opportunity afforded by the need to depict twentieth-century American life through the experience of a sizeable number of fictional characters to select figures who in their totality would constitute a cross section of American life. The narrative figures*

*in U.S.A., however, fail to achieve this kind of representativeness. The group lacks a farmer, factory worker, businessman, or professional (lawyer, doctor, etc.). Almost all the figures are from the Midwest or the East Coast, and there is not a satisfactory (or even a more than miserable) marriage in the lot. (Pizer 64)*

No matter how much I appreciate Pizer's achievement (the whole study is an example of first-rate academic writing – balanced, informed, exhaustive, comprehensible, and never boring), it is difficult for me to understand why he comments on, for instance, the absence of a lawyer, and leaves the absence of at least a single black character unmentioned. If one already realizes that Dos Passos' cross section of American life is flawed, how can one possibly not notice where? The same charge could be made repeatedly against most scholars who have dealt with the novel so far. Fifty years before the publication of Pizer's work, in his 1938 essay on the U.S.A., the critic T.K. Whipple wrote:

*The whole truth about a hundred million people throughout thirty years cannot be told in fifteen hundred – or fifteen million – pages. The novelist has to select what he considers representative and characteristic persons and events, and if Dos Passos has chosen to omit big business men, farmers and factory workers, and to dwell chiefly on midway people in somewhat ambiguous positions – intellectuals, decorators, advertising men – perhaps that is his privilege. The question is whether this picture of his, which is surely extensive enough as novels go, is entirely satisfactory within the limitations which must be granted. (Whipple 89)*

As we can see, Whipple uses the same examples for his enumeration, and leaves the same significant gap. Lionel Trilling, in a polemic reaction to Whipple's article used part of the above quotation as a point of departure for the following opinion: "This surely is a limitation in a book that has claimed for it a complete national picture. But when we say limitation we may mean just that or we may mean falsification, and I do not think that Dos Passos had falsified." (Trilling in Hook 96) Then he goes on to discuss the question of class struggle in the novel and, above all, Dos Passos' concern with morality. The question of a balanced racial representation remains – once again – unmentioned. Although for both critics this issue does not constitute the core of their arguments – their basic dispute is over their moral evaluation of Dos Passos' characters and subsequently over the quality of the novelist himself – I would still maintain that the general focus of their attention as well as lack thereof in regard to the representation of blacks tells us stories about the American mind. "Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been sur-

rounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me”, (Ellison 3) says Ellison’s *Invisible Man* about this peculiar condition. A somewhat less informed outsider might regard this statement as a modernist metaphor. Yet the example of Dos Passos and his critics has hopefully shown that these lines actually are much less poetically spectacular, much more prosaic. What Ellison says is not a gross exaggeration: that is the way things simply are. However it would be hardly possible to accuse Dos Passos and his learned entourage of their blindness, just as it would be unfair to reproach genuinely blind persons for their handicap. Their intentions are most probably the best. Yet, to use the *Prologue* to the *Invisible Man* again, “the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality,” (Ellison 3) simply does not allow them to see.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Dos Passos regards the United States as a society consisting of two nations – the representatives of big business and the world of finance, the manipulators of language and tastes, the energetic, creative yet in a way unthinking inventors on the one hand and those who in vain try to resist these groups, i.e. trade unionists, anarchists, persecuted radicals and common working-class figures. However, another division line, markedly different from that of the author, might be drawn: the nation of those represented in the novel and the nation of those who remained out of doors, excluded from Dos Passos’ narrative. Thus, despite the authorial ambition to become a chronicler of the development of the U.S. society in the first three decades of this century and to provide a possibly complete representation of all social spheres, Dos Passos almost totally ignores the question of race, one of the fundamental determining issues of American society. None of his main characters is of a different racial origin. Dos Passos’ omission is mirrored by a similar attitude on the part of American critics commenting on his work. Although they have examined the trilogy from a variety of points of view and they even pointed out the insufficient representativeness in the selection of characters, they have not – to the best of my knowledge – made the due point that a chronicle cannot be complete unless one or several characters of color be included.

E.L. Doctorow, on the other hand, offers a correction of such a selective approach to the representation of the society. While problematizing the possibility of an objectively verifiable – in fact knowable – historical account, he does not avoid social criticism. Like Dos Passos he is extremely critical of the political, business and finance establishment and pays tribute to the radical figures who

resisted the system of privilege in the society. Given their similar political positions, both authors share sympathies for those who belong to “the other America”, the disempowered groups of the nation. However, unlike Dos Passos, who sees society predominantly in terms of class, Doctorow is much more inclusive. A dominant position in his narrative is taken by characters of color and issues of racial prejudice. Similarly, Doctorow acknowledges the important part of the immigrant element in the constitution of the American nation and culture.

The comparison of the two novels from this particular point of view has not been carried out to accuse one author of a lack of attention to the issue race and praise the other for his “politically-advanced” sensitivity – although this aspect also bears some relevance. Rather, it has demonstrated – to come back to Doctorow’s notion of history – that ways of perception of past things, historical interpretations, concepts like centrality, marginality or exclusion are subject to constant reinterpretations by successive generations of novelists and historians. Doctorow’s sensitivity has been undoubtedly boosted by the civil rights movements of the late 50s and early sixties, by the social upheavals of the 1960s, by the dramatically increasing attention racial issues were gaining in American academia from the 1970s onwards. It is all these developments that had a considerable influence on his interpretation of the racial situation during the Progressive Era. Dos Passos, on the other hand, had no such tradition of awareness and critical perspective at his disposal. Therefore it appears quite obvious that a critique of a flawed representation of the American population in Dos Passos’ trilogy is not an entirely fair project.

Nevertheless, reading critically the work that I will venture to call “a chronicle of the American blindness” in connection with a later, more inclusive account, has hopefully confirmed what Ellison so effectively described in his *Prologue to the Invisible Man*. Our mind – informed by the stories we tell each other about reality – is indeed the chief determinant of our vision.

## Notes

1. Dos Passos’ sympathies with the workers’ causes, critique of the American establishment as well as political contacts on the left of the American political spectrum inevitably prompt questions concerning his allegiance to Marxist principles and views. Although he regards the society as consisting of classes, it has been argued that Dos Passos’ vision is not entirely one of a conventional Marxist. Some influential critics have pointed out a number of elements where Dos Passos, despite his obvious leftist sympathies, diverges from Marxism. First of all – as Iain Colley has pointed out – it is the vision of society as governed by ultimately mysterious forces. This vision is suggested by Dos Passos’ use of the

epigraphical quotation from Hodgins' American Climatology. Here, describing the frequent occurrence of storms raging along the forty-second parallel, despite the consistent use of the scientific jargon, Hodgins, "falls to conceal that the storms are...ultimately mysterious forces". This, of course, according to Colley, differentiates Dos Passos from a full-fledged Marxist. "To a Marxist, society is not mysterious: it has discoverable laws, by mastering which the observer can become agent, free to take part in assisting the movements of the dialectic." (Colley 67) On the other hand "the fiction of John Dos Passos persistently denies, in its atmosphere, situations, and artistic logic, that human society can be rationally understood or that there is any reason to hope for radical improvements.(...) This is the outlook of romantic pessimism (the very opposite of Marxism)." (Colley 81)

Indeed, and this is another point of divergence, there is virtually no hope in Dos Passos' universe. The one-dimensional revolutionary fanatics like Fred Hoff hardly matter as the century progresses, their numbers dwindling, their fights gradually lost; the less zealous radicals like Mac get scattered all over while most others are seduced by the possible rewards of middle-class life. In short little social improvement can be expected on the bottom end of the society. Yet the top end does not fare any better either. With a somewhat excessive dose of moralistic didacticism Dos Passos parallels J. Ward Moorehouse's spiritual withering away with his increasing bodily decrepitude. He becomes an empty, arid propaganda machine, an elegant yet sterile mouthpiece of the dominant discourse, displaying hardly any feelings, the least of all happiness. Even Dos Passos' winners end up on the losing side. There is virtually no hope for anybody.