

Contemporary American Class Literature

Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy: *American Class Literature: An Anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007

Reviewed by *Harrison*

“Oh, How It Goes on and How You Live through It!”

– Meridel LeSueur

At close to 900 pages of densely-printed text and spanning three and one-half centuries (mid 1600s-2002), this book presents both problems and possibilities for the reviewer: Problems in that in no way can even a review essay more than suggest the issues involved in doing it justice; possibilities in that, the topic being so broad, while one can't say just anything, one can touch on a lot of topics.

By way of introduction, I might note that all four words of the title are problematic. Almost uniquely, “we” are a country of immigrants speaking a number of languages: the Los Angeles school system is said to have students from more than 120 different countries. The ongoing battle over making English the official language of

This the anthology, *A r n o r n C s s t r t u r*

In traditional left thinking, especially in Europe, the working class has been seen as the revolutionary subject, the only class that can revolutionize all society because its project is not the hegemony of any one class, but the abolition of all classes. But what has been the writer's role in this project. There was one school of thought that writers and writing should be directly engaged in the effort to radically change society, that literature should be a kind of literarization of Lenin's 1902 handbook on making a revolution, *What Is to Be Done?* One of the most artistically successful examples of this is Brecht's 1930 *The Good Person of Szechwan*. But this was a dicey undertaking, due to a dynamic that, not only glorified the role of the communist party but was, mistakenly, in my opinion, viewed as Stalinist and anticipatory of the Purges of the late 1930s, and it was never performed again in Brecht's lifetime.

But there is another treatment of revolutionary art that sees a different relationship between literature and radical social change. Engels, writing to the German novelist, Minna Kautsky suggested that:

the socialist problem novel in my opinion fully carries out its mission if by a faithful portrayal of the real relations it dispels the dominant conventional illusions concerning these relations, shakes the optimism of the bourgeois world, and inevitably instills doubt as to the eternal validity of that which exists with-out itself offering a direct solution of the problem involved, even without at times ostensibly taking sides.⁶

It is this view that we see operative in *Armenian Class Struggle*