

Introduction

The People's Writer

As a novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, journalist, and editor, Michael Gold was the leading advocate of leftist, “proletarian” literature in the United States between the world wars. His acclaimed autobiographical novel of 1930, *Jews without Money*, is a vivid and historically important account of early-twentieth-century Jewish immigrant life in the tenements of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. *Jews without Money* earned enthusiastic reviews and reached a wide audience, going through eleven printings in 1930 alone. In that year, Sinclair Lewis praised the novel in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, crediting Gold with revealing “the new frontier of the Jewish East Side.”¹

During the 1930s Michael Gold became a national figure—the most famous Communist writer in America—as editor of the radical journal *New Masses* and columnist for the American Communist Party’s *Daily Worker*. In a decade when many American artists explored poverty and took Marxist-influenced positions, Gold was the acknowledged leader among class-conscious writers. With his fiction, poems, and plays, along with hundreds of impassioned columns under the title *Change the World*, he staked a claim to being the originating force of the once-mighty movement for a workers’ literature.

While the context of the “red decade” elevated Michael Gold, a second historical factor—the end of the Depression and the onset of World War II—had the opposite effect, marginalizing him as a cultural figure and destabilizing his career. After Stalin’s murderous show trials of 1936–1938 and the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939, leftist writers and critics began to repudiate their Communist ties, but Gold remained firmly in the

Soviet camp, becoming by default a “critical hatchet man”: the unofficial gatekeeper of the American Communist Party’s rigid artistic standards.

The consequences of this role were apparent in *The Hollow Men*, a collection of *Daily Worker* columns that Gold expanded for publication in 1941. Never one to suppress his political passions, Gold excoriated the literary establishment and a cadre of famous writers who had once been his friends. Though these “literary renegades” had become critical of the Party and the USSR due to specific acts of Joseph Stalin, Gold equated their defection with a general abandonment of the exploited working classes.

Underneath it all, there was another factor that angered Gold. The proletarian spirit of the Depression decade, a spirit deeply infused with Marxism and impossible without it, was by 1940 being disparaged in literary circles. As major writers disavowed their allegiances, they rejected also the great people’s culture of the 1930s, which Gold, arguably more than anyone, had helped create. In his view, the bourgeois apostates were denying democratic principles and preparing the way for fascism as World War II approached.

When McCarthyism took hold of the United States in 1950, Gold was living in France, where he had relocated in part because he foresaw the persecutions of the Cold War. But he returned to the United States in time to face the worst of the anti-Communist hysteria. With the Party under relentless attack, Gold was blacklisted, eventually losing even his low-paid newspaper work. Living on the brink of poverty, he took on menial jobs to support his family. Early in his career, the roster of Gold’s professional allies had included Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Eugene O’Neill, but in the McCarthy era he embraced and drew strength from a different circle, which included figures like Richard Wright, W. E. B. DuBois, Dorothy Day, Pete Seeger, and Paul Robeson. Everyone in the first group had abandoned the Left to the tune of Nobel Prizes or election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Everyone in the second group had remained radical and experienced arrest, blacklisting, exile, harassment, and in some cases indictment.

An unsuccessful national speaking tour in 1954 made it clear that the audience for Gold’s work was dwindling, though he was now followed closely by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. Through the 1950s he kept up correspondence with fellow dissidents, but the people’s movement he’d once led was in disarray, clearly outstripped by the disasters of a reactionary time. Though Michael Gold had been “among the cultural luminaries of

his generation,”² by midcentury he was an outcast, his life’s work, and his politics, generally disregarded or disparaged.

This was the situation in 1966, when Michael Brewster Folsom, then a graduate student at the University of California–Berkeley, initiated a new and still relevant conversation about Gold’s importance to US literary history. Folsom, reviewing for the *Nation* a mistake-plagued reprint edition of Gold’s only novel, declared that “no literary achievement of the 1930s has suffered more from the obscurity and calumny which a frightened generation has heaped on that decade than Michael Gold’s *Jews without Money*.”³ Folsom alleged that the novel had not been forgotten but “erased,” and for a single, telling reason: its author remained a Communist (and a public figure) long after that ceased to be fashionable.

Bolstering this claim was the edition Folsom was reviewing, which, like a previous reprint issued in the McCarthy era, had omitted the novel’s final paragraphs, a passage that describes the main character’s conversion to socialism and constitutes the book’s central argument. In Folsom’s view, the textual corruption produced the exact opposite of Gold’s intention, and did so in a way that symbolized the participation of the literary establishment in “the expurgation of radical opinion from American political life.” The remedy Folsom proposed was not only to restore Gold’s text and recognize the novel as a powerful work but to canonize it: “*Jews without Money* belongs in an undergraduate course in 20th-century American literature, for it is a work of literary art with an imagination and style of its own.”⁴

Michael Folsom knew something about how radical literature could be systematically marginalized. Just after his enrollment in Berkeley’s PhD program as a twenty-five-year-old in 1963, he proposed to write his dissertation on Michael Gold. Folsom’s proposal was rejected by English Department chair Henry Nash Smith, a renowned scholar of culture studies and cofounder of the American Studies discipline, on the grounds that Gold was not a significant writer and “had not written enough of any consequence.”⁵

To reach such conclusions, Smith had to either be unaware of the extent of Gold’s work, or view that work as artistically inferior, or harbor a bias against it, or a combination of all three. It’s likely that Smith quietly ascribed to views held generally in the academy that Communist art was crude and formulaic and that in promoting such art, Gold had once been the chief figure in a conspiracy against “real” literature. Professor Smith already had a reputation for rigidity; behind his back the doctoral students

dubbed him “Henry Gnash Myths,” a wry comment on his resistance to their ideas. Though Folsom argued his case, calling attention to Gold’s achievements and alluding to the fact that the aging leftist author was living just across the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, the answer was still no.

After his intended topic was denied, a typical graduate student would have decided for practical reasons to forget about it for the duration of a rigorous doctoral program. But Folsom was deeply committed to the writer he’d later refer to as “the pariah of American letters.” He ended up carrying a double burden of research toward an acceptable dissertation (he was allowed to write on Edward Bellamy, Upton Sinclair, and Jack London), while dedicating himself also to almost fanatical work on a full-scale Gold biography, becoming Gold’s personal friend and recording long interviews with him in 1965–1966. That biography was never completed, and the dual focus imposed on Folsom delayed and nearly sank his dissertation project as well. Both circumstances were due in large part to the lack of imagination, tinged with elitism, of the Berkeley English Department.

Folsom’s devotion to Gold endured for a decade, during which he produced scholarly articles and chapters, contributed an eloquent Gold obituary to the *National Guardian*, and even worked briefly to promote a film version of *Jews without Money* that never materialized. Finally, in 1972, he contracted with International Publishers (a Communist-affiliated press) to reissue a selection of Gold’s writings under the title *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*. This sizable project, undertaken while Folsom was a newly hired assistant professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was not enough to win him tenure there. Nevertheless Folsom was well satisfied with the book, seeing it as a valedictory tribute and culmination of his long recovery work, which came to a standstill soon afterward.

In the early 1980s, while teaching at Brandeis and pursuing a range of successful projects on New England history, Folsom’s career was curtailed by serious health issues. In spite of this, he continued to respond with generous encouragement to scholars young and old who wrote to him for advice and assistance with research on the author of *Jews without Money*. Until he died in 1990 at age fifty-two, Michael Folsom did more than anyone to counteract and repair Mike Gold’s elimination from twentieth-century literary history.

One of the researchers Folsom corresponded with in the 1970s was Alan Wald, a doctoral student and radical activist who shared Folsom’s passionate interest in leftist history and a desire to revive awareness of Gold’s important life. After Folsom’s death, Wald communicated with

his widow, Marcia, and with members of Mike Gold's family to arrange the permanent transfer of Folsom's research files and manuscripts to the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan.

Wald, now a retired emeritus professor at Michigan, is at this writing the most knowledgeable expert on the history of the literary Left in North America. In 2002, he published the authoritative biographical chapter, "Inventing Mike Gold," in his ground-breaking study, *Exiles from a Future Time*. This chapter, which built on Folsom's work but was enhanced by meticulous archival research and new interviews, has been the best and most reliable starting point for all serious study of Mike Gold for almost twenty years. Any Gold biography, including this one, would be impossible without the previous efforts of Folsom and Wald.

The work of John Pyros is also worth mentioning. In the mid-1970s Pyros contracted with Twayne Publishers to produce a book on Gold for the Twayne's U.S. Authors series. He and the publisher had disagreements that delayed the project and the press eventually rescinded his contract, explaining that the Communist author did not warrant a biography. "Our policy is to assign studies on significant American writers who have established reputations," wrote the editors; "unfortunately, we do not believe that Gold has attracted sufficient critical or popular attention."⁶ Pyros ended up self-publishing a manuscript, brave in its promotion of Gold, that is far from definitive but remains a valuable resource. The fact that until now there has been no real biography of Gold supports Wald's claim that his influence and reputation have yet to be fully assessed.

Though there has been a resurgence of interest in *Jews without Money* since the end of the Cold War, with more than thirty-five journal articles and book chapters published on various aspects of the novel since 1990, other phases of Gold's career await treatment, and one can still find signs that old animosities linger. Alfred Kazin's 1996 introduction to the most recent Carrol & Graf edition of *Jews without Money* insulted the author, calling Gold "a monumentally injured soul but clearly not very bright."⁷ In this Kazin echoed Paul Berman's 1983 account of Gold's life in the *Village Voice*, which felt it necessary to remind readers in its first paragraph that Gold "was no genius."⁸

Equally puzzling and demonstrably inaccurate is the once widely held notion that Gold was unproductive as a writer. A famous novel, four full-length plays and several one-acts, two anthologies of journalism, two collections of short stories, and a book of literary commentary in themselves add up to a respectable published output. What is usually forgotten or

discounted is that from 1914 to 1966 Gold also contributed over a thousand pieces—stories, poems, plays, reviews, and investigative reporting in addition to his regular column—to more than a dozen literary magazines and commercial newspapers. Defining Gold as insufficiently accomplished as a writer requires a willful dismissal of a vast body of work.

However much he wrote that is still of value, it's nevertheless true that Gold was never quite the artist he wished to be. This was because he forever served two masters: writing and social activism. He wanted to write more novels and plays, but helping strikes, protesting against war and fascism, working for the Unemployed Councils, walking in hunger marches and May Day parades, getting arrested for Sacco and Vanzetti, raising money for workers' cooperatives and to keep the *Daily Worker* alive, demonstrating for fair housing for Chicago blacks, for the Rosenbergs, for civil rights, and against the H-Bomb took time and other resources. And for fifty years, Gold's professional energies were given over to a poorly paid grind of daily politically charged journalism that won him an adoring national following and did, in fact, *change the world*, but also sapped his literary creativity.

When he died in 1967, Gold left behind a trove of literary false starts and unfinished manuscripts, including large sections of a memoir he'd been working on for more than a year. He also left a number of finished but unpublished manuscripts that have literary-historical value at this cultural moment. For example it would seem a good time to revisit and learn from *The Honorable Pete*, a drama about New York City Communist councilman Pete Cacchione. This never-performed play offers realistic treatments of the early 1930s hunger marches, the work of the Unemployment Councils, and the brutal 1932 attack by General Douglas MacArthur on the Bonus Marchers in the nation's capital. A second previously unknown play, *Song for Roosevelt*, depicts the rarely studied surge in hate crimes and anti-Semitic violence in 1940s New York while issuing guidelines and a call to collective action against fascism in the United States.

A definitive Gold biography is something that should have happened long ago. The handful of abortive attempts that have been made at such a book prompted one well-informed literary scholar, a Gold enthusiast, to half-jokingly warn that the subject was cursed. If this is true, it seems certain that the curse has been due in part to a difficulty faced by all biographers but perhaps unusually stark here: that of reconciling the subject's contradictions to reveal the person, in this case the first surviving child of Charles and Katie Granich, born Itzhok Isaak Granich. In his adult

life Gold himself, despite his personal bravery, struggled mightily with questions of identity. Gold's children called him Mike Gold but kept the Granich last name, as did his wife, Elizabeth. The medical diabetes card he carried for the last twenty-five years of his life bore the name "Michael Granich." These clues are only symbolic of course, but as *New Masses* poet and critic Stanley Burnham once accurately deduced, Mike Gold "suffered from being a bundle of selves."⁹

In preparing this book I've searched for the right way of presenting a life of great activity by a public figure known for warmth, kindness and openness who could also be unpredictable, emotionally distant and self-involved and who was capable of displaying shocking lapses in empathy. Among the selves and moods Burnham alluded to, there were stunning inconsistencies. It is one thing for Gold to have attacked the "literary renegades" when they switched political sides, but he could show harshness also toward friends, lifelong Communists on his own side of the political divide, who had treated him with good will.

John Howard Lawson, for example, reacted with shock and near disbelief to a drama review in the April 10, 1934, *New Masses*, in which Gold stated that the "great hopes" for Lawson's career had "gone unfulfilled" because the playwright was full of "adolescent self-pity," had "learned nothing," and was "lost like Hamlet." Lawson's plays, Gold wrote, "projected his own confused mind on the screen of history."¹⁰ Joseph Freeman and Albert Maltz endured similar stinging insults, and though Gold eventually apologized to these friends, it is unlikely that the harm was completely erased.

In this biography I do not ignore such episodes or the questions they raise, but my focus is generally elsewhere. My goal is to present a large amount of new biographical information in a clear and synthesized narrative while maintaining a balanced perspective on the subject's personal and literary life. A biography should work to uncover and convey something of the best spirit of its subject while not being blind to flaws.

The People's Writer is also not significantly a book about political or aesthetic theory, nor does it treat internal Communist Party politics or Gold's relationships with fellow Communists in depth. As I understand Gold, he was primarily a writer and reserved his deepest passions for that activist mission. It was widely known that he was uninterested in political minutiae, and his many deep friendships were not made at Party meetings.

Some Cold War-era historians and academics found it difficult to forgive Gold his views, much less understand them, and this was likely a

factor inhibiting the publication of critical-biographical work dedicated to him. But much has changed in the nearly thirty years since the Cold War ended, perhaps making it somewhat easier to both distinguish Gold's personality from his politics and make fairer judgments about the type of activists US Communists really were. If we realize, as we should, that Gold was dead wrong about the exculpatory versions of Stalin's brutality he accepted and circulated, we should also recognize that American Communists were not guilty of such brutalities and were, in fact, collectively a peaceful, democratic, and consistently progressive force for good in US social history. Gold's legacy is a brilliant example, offering clear lessons about the means and methods of defeating racism, anti-Semitism, fascism and xenophobia, lessons that can help us survive these fearful times and break the cycle of terror and hate worldwide.

In consideration of these factors, this biography rests also on the premise that there is significance and inherent value *for today* in a book-length treatment of Gold's struggles as a radical writer. Having myself discovered the full range and impact of Gold's career fairly late, I vouch for the efficacy of internalizing his story, believing that there's much to learn from his oppositional life, lived so as to insistently question hierarchies while challenging tradition, the status quo, received assumptions, and the injustice they perpetuate.

A few words about the book's biographical content. In piecing together the facts of Gold's development, I've relied on the efforts of previous researchers supplemented by my own interviews and many hours of archival work. Some events are rendered using a level of detail that could prompt questions about how they were constructed. How do I know, for example, the exact steps of the process Gold and his brothers used to make suspender fasteners in 1903? How do I know that, while living in a chateau in rural France in summer 1948, Gold's sons fished from a surrounding moat by dropping a baited line out their bedroom window?

Much of the detail comes from phone and in-person discussions with Gold's sons Nick and Carl, now eighty-four and eighty years old, respectively, who generously shared memories of their family life during the 1940s and 1950s in New York and France. Concerning Gold's early childhood in the Lower East Side Jewish ghetto, I use new facts and anecdotes from a series of oral history interviews recorded by Gold's younger brother Manny in the early 1980s. These conversations were meant to become the basis of Manny's memoirs but remain unpublished. The

transcript of the interview tapes, which runs to over 600 pages, is held in the Wagner Labor Archives of New York University's Tamiment Library.

Gold's own unpublished memoirs, consisting largely of monologues recorded in the last two years of his life and transcribed by Elizabeth Granich, were accessed in the Gold-Folsom Papers at Michigan and also helpful. Additionally, Gold's unfinished work manuscripts, scattered over several decades, contain many pages of personal writings that have yet to be fully organized and interpreted. Looking through these papers, one finds scribbled fragments of poetry, drafts of plays, and undated pages of descriptive prose about events like Gold's first trip to Russia or conditions he encountered while accompanying hunger marches in the early 1930s. The autobiographical notes that begin chapter 8 of this book exemplify my use of such fragmentary material, in this case to provide insight into Gold's domestic life under McCarthyism. There are more such artifacts in the fourteen boxes held in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan Special Collections.

Another largely untapped source of information about Gold's life and habits lies in the hundreds of *Change the World* columns he wrote for the *Daily Worker* and later for the *San Francisco People's World*. A book much longer than this one could be stitched together from excerpts and passages in these columns. I have used the articles selectively for certain biographical anecdotes. Of special value are the 1959 *People's World* columns that were collected by Folsom under the title, *A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums*, a series Gold referred to as a "sequel" to *Jews without Money*.

Gold's FBI surveillance file, a resource tapped also by Folsom and Alan Wald, occasionally offers insights that are unavailable elsewhere. The summary file compiled at the Washington, DC, headquarters of the FBI has long been available to scholars. In this biography, however, I also use newly declassified material not previously accessed. In particular I am grateful to John Perosio at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, for declassifying, at my request, the Gold file compiled by the Detroit FBI Field Office from 1950 to 1956.

There is, of course, much more for future researchers to discover, but I hope these sources together make for an accurate and satisfying narration. In some passages I've felt confident enough to speculate about what Gold may have been thinking at certain moments. These interpretive liberties are based on my best conjecture after long study of Gold's world and work.

It's worth stating also that the writing of a scholarly book about Mike Gold comprises a challenge and a bit of a paradox. In 1914 Gold attended Harvard for a couple of months; ever afterward he was suspicious of the purists and professors, the "book-proud intellectuals" and smug arbiters of literary taste. He had a point. It was sometimes the academics who dismissed Gold and decided he was not a real artist. He missed few opportunities to push back against the ivory tower. "Literature is one of the products of civilization like steel or textiles," Gold wrote in 1929, "it is not any more mystic in its origin than a ham sandwich."¹¹ He exhorted young workers to "Write. Persist. Struggle," and advised them that the way to make literature was simply to tell about their lives in plain terms, "in the same language you use in writing a letter."¹² Clearly, a Gold biography written in a pedantic style would be wrong on many levels.

For related reasons it's fitting that one of the best portraits of Gold that I encountered in my work came from a professor of music and folklore studies who eventually gave up his academic job to become a social worker and union leader. Richard A. Reuss, author of the 2000 study *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics*, seems to have distilled Gold's character with understanding and precision. In chapter 6 I trace Gold's substantial role as a theorist of American leftist folk music, relying on Reuss among a handful of music scholars to tell the story. For now I want to close this introduction by sharing and enlarging on Reuss's insights to suggest or establish a few basic things about the personality of my subject.

"Michael Gold, a self-appointed critic of cultural affairs in the Communist movement for half a century, was a dynamic and controversial personality who stirred strong admiration or antipathy in those who came in contact with him."¹³ The antipathy Reuss noted here was most often the direct product of Gold's firmly held leftist beliefs and the hostility he brought to bear against defectors or apostates. Even those who loved Gold knew that there could be no compromise about certain core convictions. As his lifelong friend Dorothy Day explained, he "would not hear" criticisms of the Soviet Union. Alan Wald has noted that Gold should be understood as a hard-core "campist." He unwaveringly chose the Soviet camp as fanatically as figures like Max Eastman and John Dos Passos eventually chose the "Western" (capitalist) camp. The Cold War exacerbated these long disputes, which left Gold isolated and largely silenced for most of his later career.

Reuss continues: "He became a radical in 1914, and from then until his death in 1967 devoted most of his energy to filling newspaper and

magazine columns on nearly every phase of art and its place in society.”¹⁴ This is perceptive in two ways. First, where literary culture was concerned, Gold detested the notion of “art for art’s sake.” He rejected elitist or escapist works in favor of novels, stories, plays, and poetry that directly addressed contentious social issues. Second, Reuss refers to the question of how Gold spent his great but not limitless energy. Hemingway and O’Neill, who knew Gold well in the 1930s, bemoaned his activist writing, stating publicly their belief that he could be a major artist if he would sublimate his political aims, eschew propaganda, and give his best energy to questions of literary craft. Though there was never a chance of this happening, any valuation of Gold as a writer—favorable or unfavorable—hinges on one’s notions about the role of art in society.

Labor reporter Art Shields, who was close to Gold for four decades, argued that literary elites were simply “blind to the quality” of his friend’s newspaper work. Shields pointed out that “Journalism becomes an art—a literary art—in the hands of masters like John Reed and Mike Gold,” and that “many of Mike’s admirers”—especially working-class admirers, who decidedly lacked status as literary tastemakers—“think some of his best writing is found in his *Change the World* columns.”¹⁵ The process of researching this book has largely won me over to Shields’s view.

Though Reuss seems bemused by the idea that “Gold’s unorthodox ideas often horrified Communist Party leaders,”¹⁶ this claim is accurate. For example in February 1932 the *Daily Worker* reported on a recently held debate between Gold and Heywood Broun on the question of “Socialism versus Communism.” The article pointed out that Gold was unprepared and added a warning that the idea that he spoke for the Party was dangerous and harmful. Gold knew and understood that he was frequently off-message where the Marxist doctrine was concerned, but it didn’t silence him or especially bother him. Eventually he and the Party reached a rapprochement that excused him from branch meetings and policy making while allowing him to represent the Party in the role of what First Secretary Earl Brower termed its (unofficial) “poet.” Gold’s strength, along with his value to the Communist movement, stemmed from his ability to bridge gaps between people and policies, between committee decisions and the aspirations of the masses.

As Reuss concludes his sketch of Gold’s salient traits, he observes that the author “hated the capitalist system with a furious intensity. On its witting or unwitting supporters he unleashed some of the most vitriolic attacks in the annals of Communist literature. At the same time, he

was sincerely devoted to the great masses of American men and women laborers and translated his affection into warm, often humorous accounts of their struggles and triumphs.” As Shields remembered, his friend and colleague “never pretended to be a Leninist scholar,” but “Mike’s heart beat with the working class” in a role he always fearlessly embraced, a writer for the people.¹⁷ Although, as Reuss acknowledged, “many intellectuals regarded him as a romantic visionary or a fool, . . . his popularity with rank and file sympathizers was enormous, and his journalism was among the most widely read in the movement.”¹⁸

On a national speaking tour in 1954, Gold visited Minnesota, the home state of leftist-feminist writer Meridel LeSueur, who welcomed her visitor from New York, chaired the meeting at which he spoke, and introduced him to local progressives afterward. The thoughts Gold recorded about this visit for *Masses & Mainstream* showed how far his artistic priorities had traveled in the direction away from the *mainstream* toward the *masses*. Scanning the Minnesota countryside through a dirty bus window at the age of sixty-one, Gold thought first of the state’s famous and canonized writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis. He then discarded these establishment artists because, as he realized in surveying the northern landscape, they “simply never saw or described the region.” In Gold’s view, “they were as far from the basic life of its masses as the first-class passenger on some ocean liner is from the reality of engine room and fo’cs’le.” Then Gold considered LeSueur, a fellow ostracized writer largely unknown outside her community and the narrowing circle of progressives, and chose LeSueur’s native-born activist persona as “an example of what a people’s writer should be.” LeSueur was an inspiration, Gold explained, because she was “involved in the freedom struggles of her people today.”¹⁹

The national tour Gold was then completing occurred at a low and despairing moment in the history of the American Communist Party. Yet there was no pessimism in Gold about either the present or the future. Art Shields, Gold’s friend for forty-five years, considered this trait important, once stating in print that “the cynic and Mike were at two opposite poles.”²⁰ Reuss, the discerning professor cum union organizer, never met Gold but likewise understood: “All his life, he retained a passionate love for genuine working-class culture, which he professed to see proliferating at almost every turn down the road.”²¹