

Aesop Said So: Ancient Wisdom and Radical Politics in 1930s New York

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This study explores a mode of vernacular political theorizing. It focuses on American 'proletarian artist' Hugo Gellert's publication, Aesop Said So (1936), an illustrated volume of a select number of Aesop's fables that uses satirical cartoons to assert a parallel between the fables' unassailable lessons and a critique of industrial capitalism and fascist sentiments. This article details how Gellert's work presents a subversive Aesop that resonates with current scholarship in classics that highlights the disruptive features of Aesopic wisdom as it surfaces in ancient prose writing. This article also compares Gellert's identification in antiquity of a politically useful voice from below with other examples of the presence of ancient models in 1930s politically charged art, such as Paul Manship's gilded statue of Prometheus for Rockefeller Centre, NY (1933) and Diego Rivera's mural 'Man at the Crossroads' for the lobby of Rockefeller Plaza's signature skyscraper (1932/33), that was destroyed amid a political controversy.

This article explores a single point of contact between an ancient source and modern creative adaptation — visual artist Hugo Gellert's publication, *Aesop Said So* (1936).¹ Gellert approaches Aesop in translation and unaided by scholarly study, yet breaks from the long tradition of finding in the Aesopica some gentle moral lessons suitable for children just learning to read and think. In particular, Gellert delivers a forceful Marxist critique of material conditions of life under 'decadent capitalism' in the popular mode of an illustrated volume of Aesop's fables. He does this by affixing to each fable a satirical cartoon that asserts a parallel between an original tale's unassailable critique of a feature of social, political or economic reality and a proletarian view of a specific aspect of the oppressive 'modern social scene'.

The result is an exercise in vernacular political theorizing.² Gellert's collection of texts and images conveys a theoretically sophisticated analysis of present-day politics in a medium intended to engage a broad audience in reflecting on their everyday lives.

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¹ The full text (with images) can be viewed at the website of Graphic Witness, Visual Arts and Social Commentary: <http://www.graphicwitness.org/contemp/aesop.htm>, accessed 6 January 2016.

² Cf. Plato's *Phaedo* (60c–61b) where Socrates talks about making popular poetry out of Aesop's well-known myths.

Gellert's exploration of the political potential of the fables is not idiosyncratic. Instead, it resonates with Leslie Kurke's innovative account of the way Aesopic wisdom surfaces in the ancient sources. She proposes that it is possible to see in Aesop not simply clever tales suitable for general moral education and entertainment but a resource 'available as a mask or alibi for critique, parody, or cunning resistance by any who felt themselves disempowered in the face of some kind of unjust or inequitable institutional authority'.³ She stresses that Aesop was treated as just such a resource by 5th and 4th century prose writers and observes that for the Greeks 'Aesop and his characteristic styles of discourse were by no means intended for children; they were instead edgy, disruptive, and dangerous'.⁴ Scholars have questioned aspects of Kurke's thesis, raising concerns about whether the fables really provide access to a subversive ideology present in antiquity. For example, Edith Hall agrees that the fables are adult fare but cautions that, as Page DuBois has argued, animal fables possibly naturalize human hierarchies and their pathologies in ways that promote their acceptance as features of unchangeable biological existence. Hall has also noted that the collection as a whole possibly articulates frustrations that beset all unequal human relations and that the fables represent various points of view.⁵ But my concern is not to establish whether particular political sensibilities are necessarily inherent in the very architecture of individual fables themselves or in a body of fables. Rather, I am interested in Kurke's suggestion that ancient prose writers found the fables amenable to regular deployment as rebellious points of view. Gellert's *Aesop Said So* echoes that practice. Subversive meanings are exercised at 'the point of reception',⁶ that is, in Gellert's text.

Gellert's presentation of Aesopic wisdom is in some ways unlike works of subversive critique that have been termed 'Aesopic' by commentators on modern literature and serves to remind us of some of the meanings that might have been available to ancient readers.⁷ For instance, Gellert does not turn to the medium of fable to camouflage his views, evade censors or avoid the material consequences of resistance. His images have coded meanings with a low clarity threshold (satirical cartoons that deploy stock imagery). They serve up very thinly disguised attacks on named industrial elites and public authorities. And they don't only take on greed and corruption. They also take on the weakness of will and delusional attitudes of working people who do not stand up and, for example, join the Communist Party of the USA (as did Gellert). Gellert's *Aesop Said So* is explicitly confrontational even though its targets are generalized or (thinly) veiled. It is not a work of illustrated literature designed to nurture a furtive community but a graphic pamphlet

3 Kurke (2011: 12).

4 L. Kurke, 'A New Look at Aesop', Townsend Center for the Humanities. University of California, Berkeley. September 2010.

5 Hall (2011), DuBois (2003). See also Nagy (2011).

6 Martindale (1993).

7 Patterson (1991).

concerned to address a wide audience in a morally and politically serious — though not haughty and pedantic — way.⁸

Gellert's turn to Aesop can also direct us to a little noticed aspect of the dynamic art scene in New York at that time. *Aesop Said So* is part of a lively contest among artists concerning the way the legacy of Greek antiquity might figure in the visual vocabulary of current, specifically American, political discourse. For example, I will show that this book is in dialogue with at least two highly visible contemporaneous projects for Rockefeller Centre with which Gellert was certainly familiar. The first is Paul Manship's gilded statue of Prometheus installed in 1933. This work links human progress and the legacy of Greek antiquity to the technological achievements of industrial capitalism (and possibly to a specific risk-taking, American philanthropic captain of industry, John D. Rockefeller, Jr.). The second is Diego Rivera's mural 'Man at the Crossroads' originally painted in the lobby of Rockefeller Plaza's signature skyscraper in 1932/33 and notoriously destroyed before ever going on public display. Rivera's mural includes elements that assert that the rejection of the 'legacy' of Greek and Roman antiquity must inform progressive ideals. In contrast to these works by Manship and Rivera, Gellert's *Aesop Said So* broadcasts the presence of a strong, morally sound, politically savvy and thus useful voice from below in the literary record of Greek antiquity. Gellert's adaptation of Aesop is evidence of a class-conscious deployment of a classical source by an activist on the 'cultural front' of the radical politics of the 'red decade' in American politics.⁹

Gellert reads Aesop politically

Hugo Gellert was a prominent figure in 1930s art circles and labour politics but he is little remembered today. He immigrated with his family to the US from Hungary as a teenager in 1905 and received a traditional art education at Cooper Union and the National Academy of Design. He travelled back to Europe as an art student but returned to the US with the outbreak of World War I. His brother's death while in detention in New Jersey as a conscientious objector to the draft had a powerful impact on him. Gellert spent the war years avoiding the draft working in Mexico as an agricultural labourer and throughout the 1920s remained vigorously anti-militarist.

8 Compare with the less politically serious but still often moralizing popular series of cartoon shorts called 'Aesop's Film Fables' in theatres throughout the 1920s and into the early 30s. The creation of Paul Terry, an artist thought to have inspired Walt Disney, this collection of hundreds of six minute films adapted noted tales of Aesop but also told all sorts of stories through the medium of animation, a medium the artist seems to have considered 'Aesopic' in some rudimentary way. Films can be viewed at: http://www.bcdb.com/cartoons/Other_Studios/F/Fables_Studios/, accessed 6 January 2016

For records see the Internet Movie Database for 'Aesop's Fables Studios' and 'Van Beuren Studios'.

9 Denning (1997), Lyons (1941). On class-conscious uses of ancient sources see <http://www.classicsandclass.info>, accessed 6 January 2016.

However, the rise of fascism prompted him to support the entry of the US into World War II, organize 'Artists for Victory' and work for Roosevelt's re-election.

Starting as a young man Gellert steadfastly refused to make art that remained 'remote from the historic conflicts in which all men must take sides'¹⁰ and instead self-identified as a 'proletarian artist' and 'culture worker' and remained so all his life.¹¹ He consistently took up radical political themes in his art and was an ardent trade unionist active in organizing artists to improve wages and working conditions, protest censorship, and to create better relationships between artists and the public. He rejected easel painting as an elite practice that depended on critics, exhibition and private sales, choosing instead to work in media that were not isolated from the public, chiefly illustrations for major market publications and mural painting in public buildings.¹² Radical literary journals such as the *Liberator*, *Masses* and *New Masses* featured his work; his illustration graced the cover of the March 1918 issue of *The Liberator* that ran the first reports of John Reed's eyewitness account of the 'Bolsheviki Revolution', later to be published as *Ten Days that Shook the World*.¹³ Gellert's caricatures of plutocrats and politicians as well as serious portraits of various public figures also appeared regularly in many mainstream venues throughout the 1920s and 30s, including *The New Yorker*, where he was on the staff for decades, as well as in *The New York Times* and *Daily Worker*. He gained prominence in the interwar years as both an artist and avid supporter of the Communist Party of the US. His career got derailed after World War II by the combined effects of having been investigated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and nearly deported, and the rise of abstract expressionism. He spent years in his wife's native Australia, returning to the US in the 1950s where he continued to produce art and take part in progressive activism until his death at 93 in 1985.¹⁴

10 'Draft Manifesto. The John Reed Club of New York', *New Masses*, New York, June 1932. Gellert founded the first John Reed Club in 1929.

11 *Hugo Gellert. 1892-1985. People's Artist*. Hugo Gellert Memorial Committee, New York, May 1986. Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

12 The murals by Gellert are mostly lost. However, see <http://newdeal.feri.org/gellert/index.htm>, (accessed 6 January 2016) for accounts of some of the most notable, including work done for the Workers Party Cafeteria in 1928, the Museum of Modern Art's Murals by Painters and Photographers Exhibition in 1932 and the walls of the Century Theatre at Rockefeller Centre in 1933. This website details successful efforts in 1998 to save Gellert's mural for the Seward Park Housing Complex in New York City, a project originally constructed in 1959 by the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) as moderately-priced union housing.

13 Gellert is featured as one of the on-camera witnesses in the 1981 film *Reds* about John Reed directed by Warren Beatty.

14 A biographical overview is available at the website of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution:

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/hugo-gellert-papers-7845/more>, accessed 6 January 2016

Some signs of Gellert's interest in the possible potency of appeals to antiquity in 1930s political discourse predate his publication of *Aesop Said So*. In particular, he employs familiar ancient material in his 1934 book, *Karl Marx's 'Capital' in Lithographs*. That text aims to adapt the 'revolutionary concepts' of Marxism into an inspiring form accessible to a mass audience.¹⁵ *Capital in Pictures*, as Gellert's inside title page reads, assembles excerpts from an English translation of *Capital* representing, in his view, 'the most essential parts of the original' and affixes a telling illustration to each chapter. Gellert's claim is that the illustrations are key means by which the principles of political economy described in the excerpted text can be explained to a general reader. It is with 'the aid of the drawings', he asserts in the foreword, that 'the necessary material for the understanding of the fundamentals of Marxism is included' in this book. Most of the chapters of *Capital in Lithographs* are illustrated with images that draw on commonplace twentieth-century political iconography, for example, muscular labourers and farmers, cruel slave masters, buffoonish fat cats in top hats, organizers with bull horns, dreary industrial cityscapes and symbols such as ticker-tape machines. But twice Gellert designs images that highlight Marx's own attention to ancient models in the accompanying excerpts from *Capital*. One appears when Gellert reprints words from Marx's *Preface* to an 1867 edition of *Capital* that explicitly call upon the idea of Perseus hunting monsters to valorize the idea of theoretically searching out the sources of oppression. He places opposite that text a dynamic drawing of a muscular Perseus grasping a shield with one arm and his sword with the other (rendered from behind so that the viewer too is placed in his protection). The other appears when he reproduces Marx's references to the wisdom of Aristotle in explanation of the labour theory of value, and places opposite this text a portrait of Aristotle that visually downplays his association with ethereal philosophy. Aristotle is, in his hands, a muscular culture worker (Fig. 1).

On two additional occasions in *Capital in Lithographs* Gellert inserts new references to ancient models. The first appears in the text only. In the foreword Gellert refers to the Russian Revolution (and Lenin in particular) as a 'new Prometheus'

See also Weschler (2002) and webpages on Gellert at the New Deal Network: <http://newdeal.feri.org/gellert/wechsler.htm> and at the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York <http://maryryangallery.com/artists/hugo-gellert/>, accessed 6 January 2016.

An overview of his life and art is also available in *Hugo Gellert. 1892-1985. People's Artist*, Hugo Gellert Memorial Committee, New York, May 1986, Special Collections, Northwestern University Library. See also 'Retaining the Accent: Hugo Gellert and the Hungarian Cultural-Political Nexus', *Hungarian Studies Review*, Vol. XXXI, nos. 1-2, 2005, pp. 77-106. Archival resources include Hugo Gellert Papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and Hugo Gellert Papers at The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labour Archives, New York University.

¹⁵ Gellert (1934: Foreword). The text can be viewed at the website maintained by Graphic Witness, Visual Arts and Social Commentary: <http://www.graphicwitness.org/contemp/marxtitle.htm>, accessed 6 January 2016



Fig. 1. Hugo Gellert, Portrait of Aristotle from *Karl Marx's 'Capital' in Lithographs* (New York: Ray Long & Richard R. Smith, 1934).

rising in the East. The second appears in an illustration only. In the image that accompanies the chapter presenting an excerpt from *Capital* concerning the way technological developments lead to the prolongation of the working day and the intensification of the exploitation of labour, Gellert recalls the punishment of Ixion in Greek mythology. His illustration shows female and child labourers bound to intertwined wheels that are always spinning.

Gellert's overall aim in *Capital in Lithographs* is to show general readers that Marxist economic theory is 'like the X-ray, it discloses the depths below the surface'.¹⁶ And I have shown that to do this he occasionally mobilizes disparate

¹⁶ Gellert (1934: Foreword).

ancient archetypes in the service of navigating these theoretical depths and assumes each one, Perseus, Aristotle, Prometheus, and Ixion — to be easily legible. Gellert undertakes a different project in *Aesop Said So*. In this volume his aim is to ‘warn’ general readers of the abundance of duplicity in the world and to coach them to become savvy navigators of the political manifestations of the class struggle in their everyday lives.¹⁷ In the foreword he makes this clear: ‘Let us heed the warning, and listen to that voice, the voice of the Slave who became a Free Man.’¹⁸

Other parts of the front matter further stress Aesop’s camaraderie across time. For example, alongside his close-up portrait of Aesop in the frontispiece Gellert places a full body portrait of a representative contemporary ‘culture worker’, specifically a mural painter atop a ladder¹⁹ (Fig. 2). Gellert was himself not only a muralist but also at that time organizing the Mural Artists Guild of the United Scenic Artists of America Local 829, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL).²⁰ The composition of the frontispiece places the muralist, brush in hand and with his gaze fixed optimistically upwards, on a ladder that perfectly corresponds to one side of Aesop’s strong face. The muralist’s viewpoint and Aesopic wisdom are in alignment. The composition of the frontispiece also makes the two sides of the mural painter’s ladder frame Aesop’s ear as if to stress that readers should, echoing the title of the book, ‘listen up!’.

The dedication is also explicitly topical. It reads, ‘To Tom Mooney’, and presents the text of the fable, ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ accompanied by an illustration of a man behind bars. Tom Mooney was an activist (falsely) convicted, and sentenced to death, for being part of a 1916 plot to bomb a San Francisco event promoting the US entry into World War I. His case was the focus of a great deal of controversy nationwide. President Wilson commuted his sentence to life, and he was finally exonerated and released in 1939. But at the time of Gellert’s publication of *Aesop Said So* in 1936, Mooney was in prison and had been for nearly nineteen years. The image of Mooney behind bars in the dedication is an explicit citation of an element of

17 Gellert (1936: Foreword).

18 The biographical detail (Aesop was a slave) was reported in Lowrie’s introduction to the 1925 edition of *Aesop’s Fables* that Gellert appears to have used as his source (see note 21 below). Gellert makes no effort to relate any other details regarding the life of Aesop from any ancient sources.

19 The face of Aesop draws on features of the seventeenth century painting of Aesop by Diego Rodríguez Velázquez (Aesop, Museo del Prado, Madrid [179 x 94 cm, Ca. 1638]). An image can be viewed at: <http://www.diegovelazquez.org/Aesop-1639-41.html>, accessed 6 January 2016.

20 See Aneus et al. (2006: 331 n. 20) and ‘Muralists Unionize’, *Art Digest*, 1 January 1938. Some accounts of Gellert’s biography identify the Guild as an affiliate of the AFL-CIO but in the 1930s rivalries inside the labour movement kept the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) estranged. They merged only in 1955.

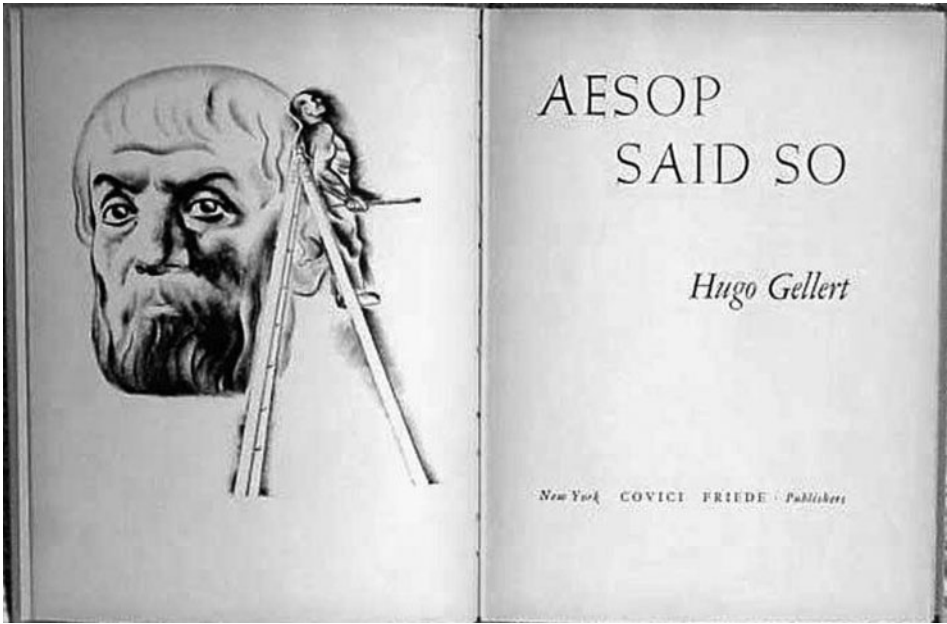


Fig. 2. Hugo Gellert, Frontispiece, *Aesop Said So* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936).

a controversial Gellert mural entitled, 'Us Fellas Got to Stick Together or The Last Defenses of Capitalism'. This mural portrays:

three tiers of men arranged according to social classes. At the top is the ruling alliance—President Hoover, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and Henry Ford shown in league with the gangster, Al Capone. Clutching bags of money, they are depicted as driven by greed and power. Soldiers and lawmen, the civil servants that enforce the status quo and keep the economic system functioning, occupy the middle tier. Tom Mooney, the trade unionist arrested in San Francisco on false charges of pipe bombing, is shown imprisoned at the bottom of the panel.²¹

Alongside the allusion to this mural Gellert prints a fable about a wolf and a lamb that calls attention to the way the powerful can not only prevail but also slyly

21 Content description (Accession number 87.1462.5.2.2) in the Wolfsonian — Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection. It can be viewed at <http://digital.wolfsonian.org/WOLFoo2737/00001>, (last accessed 6 January 2016). Gellert made this mural specifically for the new Museum of Modern Art's exhibition 'Murals by American Painters and Photographers' (Exh. #16, 3–31 May 1932) on the theme, as he remembered it in a later interview, 'the world today'. The museum tried to withhold it from exhibition (along with several other highly political ones) but the artists organized, threatened to withdraw all the works and prevailed. See Gellert's account of the event at page 16–17 of 'Hugo Gellert Interview,' 5 April 1984, Hugo Gellert Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

manufacture justifications for their self-serving, corrupt actions. The dedication introduces Gellert's practice of suggesting that the fables can exercise modern political sensibilities.

While Gellert suggests being mindful of Aesop as a political stance, extensive familiarity with the mass of Aesopica is not what he has in mind. In *Aesop Said So* Gellert culls only 18 fables from the over 200 included in the English language publication he treated as his source.²² Gellert finds in each 'original' text a truth that has a contemporary analogue and uses 'pungent proletarian' illustrations to make each and every analogue explicit.²³ Accordingly, unlike other modern illustrated volumes of Aesop's fables in circulation, including the one he relied on as his source, his illustrations are decidedly not literal.²⁴ His images are political cartoons that feature satirical portraits of known figures placed in stylized modern locations; understanding them required familiarity with the current affairs of the period.

The format of *Aesop Said So* presents a series of pairs of text and image on facing pages. Each pairing of text and image carries two titles. The lead one in capital letters guides the reader to appreciate Gellert's visualization of the fable's topical meaning. A secondary title in parentheses refers to the 'original' tale. By representing the texts of the fables as 'original' and 'unaltered' Gellert signals that he presents the text of the fables in the familiar, old traditional style and not that he took them verbatim

22 James (1925). The fables Gellert draws on appear on pages 16–18, 19, 35, 51, 52, 56, 69–70, 85, 88, 103, 105–106, 122, 124, 136, 174, 182, 193, 194 and 200. Gellert does not credit this publication as his source but the translations he relies upon are in almost all cases nearly identical to the ones in this collection.

23 Book jacket, *Aesop Said So*.

24 In contrast consider two other editions in circulation at the time that include modern images that are nonetheless literal. (1) One is Gellert's source James (1925) with illustrations by John Tenniel. James was a seventeenth century fellow of New College, Oxford. Tenniel's illustrations were added in the second half of the nineteenth century. (Tenniel was the main political cartoonist for *Punch* magazine and the illustrator of the first edition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.) His images visually represent the literal content of the ancient fables, though the people are all rendered as modern figures in modern dress and settings, and the animals are in familiar modern English scenes (barnyard, countryside). The colour cover illustration features a fox dancing beneath a grape arbor. (2) Another is Calder (1931). This edition reproduces the English text of a 1692 collection of fables by pamphleteer Sir Roger L'Estrange, an English royalist. L'Estrange's turgid text contrasts sharply with Calder's light and dramatically contemporary images. Each figure or animal is drawn in simple lines (reminiscent of Calder's wire sculptures of circus figures completed in the late 1920s). Calder's drawings abstract from any specific historical settings and provocatively render some of the animals and people in anatomically explicit yet not erotic ways. The cover was bright purple and included a line drawing.

from his source text (or did any source criticism). For example, one pairing carries the following two titles:

A WOUNDED STRIKER AND THE SOLDIER

(The Eagle and the Arrow).

The so-called 'original text reproduced on the left facing page reads:

An Eagle was mortally wounded by an Arrow. As he turned his head in the agonies of death, he saw that the Arrow was winged with his own feathers.

'How much sharper, said he, 'are the wounds made by weapons which we ourselves have supplied.'

The illustration on the right facing page explains each fable's value as a warning. In this example, the illustration depicts an American soldier in uniform forcing a bleeding American worker to his knees at the point of a bayonet. We know from the title that he is on strike. (There are no visual cues to that detail.) Reading the text and images together, and alert to the double title, we can see that this pair is about strikebreaking. The text laments the availability of working men's labour (soldiers) and the products of American manufacturing (bayonets) for the violent suppression of resistance to the exploitation of fellow workingmen (strikebreaking). The fable warns of the unnamed processes that conspire to allow working people in uniform to be used as strikebreakers; in the fable, the eagle's feathers become part of the arrow that mortally wounds him. The fable also represents a moment of consciousness; the eagle turns around to see his feathers affixed to the arrow and realizes how much 'sharper' are 'the wounds made by weapons which we ourselves have supplied'. Gellert's alteration of the first line of the text he pulled from his source makes clear his interest in addressing the mysterious and corrupt process rather than the eagle's personal sorrows. The source's first line reads: 'A Bowman took aim at an Eagle and hit him in the heart.'²⁵ Gellert removed reference to the bird's 'heart', thus limiting the fable's sentimentality.

A great deal of Gellert's theorizing comes not only in the form of pairing text and image but also in the sequencing of the fables. The ones at the start of his book address class-consciousness and courageous confrontation, while the next few expose systemic connections between inequality and injustice. These are followed by depictions of the dangers and setbacks that progressives encounter in their struggles to capture political power and effect change. Gellert closes the text with fables that celebrate the achievement of solidarity and perseverance. As a whole it mobilizes Aesopica to promote literacy in radical critique.

Gellert opens the book with a tale with the double title, 'The Laboring Man and the Ostrich', and 'The Wild Boar and the Ostrich'. He modified his source slightly by replacing the original 'fox' with 'ostrich'. The reason he did this is easy to see. He

²⁵ James (1925: 103).

uses the fable to drive home the point that the working class must have a keen eye for dangers that lie ahead and not shy away from confrontation. The illustration shows the labouring man sharpening his axe. The next pairing of text and image has the double title 'The Distribution of Wealth' and 'The Lion and Other Beasts A-Hunting.' The illustration shows a massive vacuum moving through the industrial district of a city sucking up everything in its path, including whole factories, into its bloated bag. The vacuum is likely a reference to the failure of the US government to stop the merger of Socony and Vacuum Oil. As a result of the Sherman Antitrust Act, in 1911 Standard Oil was broken up into Socony (Standard Oil Co. of NY) and 33 other independent companies. In 1931 the US Government gave up its attempt to prevent the merger of Socony and Vacuum Oil (into an entity they renamed Mobilgas). The accompanying tale invites readers to identify the behaviour of the vacuum/capitalists with that of a true apex predator. Gellert scales back the tale as it appeared in his source. Instead of recounting a hunting 'party' gone awry Gellert refers to the coordination of three unnamed beasts as an 'alliance' and directly, and very briefly, states the facts: the alliance takes a stag, the lion divides it in three parts, and the lion also takes all three parts for himself simply because he can (though he cloaks his claim to the meat in the language of authority and earnings). Gellert makes the fable address links between the exploitation of labour, expropriation of wealth and the natural drive towards the accumulation of capital. Wholly irrelevant now is the individualistic 'moral' that originally appeared at the end of hunting-party version of the tale in Gellert's source ('better be wise by the misfortunes of others than by your own'²⁶).

The next fourteen pairs of text and image in *Aesop Said So* amount to a tour of the kinds of difficulties that the working class must navigate in the struggle to advance their own material interests and the cause of economic justice. Gellert uses the fables to valorize solidarity and counsel against getting taken in by false friends. For example, Gellert turns to the fable about 'The Trees and the Axe' to comment on, as he puts it in the accompanying up-to-date title, 'The Negro, the Foreign Born and Discrimination.' The image provides the key to unpacking the meaning in the fable. Gellert's depicts in dramatic close up two muscular arms, one black and one white, both with clenched fists and shackled to the same pair of handcuffs. It visualizes the way persistent racial discrimination positively disables both groups. The title's reference to 'foreign born' asks readers to see anti-immigrant bias as a similarly serious impediment to solidarity and promotion of common interests of the masses. Read through the image, the corresponding fable shows how prejudice is a moral failure and illuminates the enormous stakes in play for the working class in the struggle against discrimination. In the fable, a woodsman demands of a group of several types of trees that they supply him with the raw material to make a handle for his axe. The majority of trees betray the plainest among them in an effort to placate the woodsman. Of course the woodsman ends up sparing none of them but instead uses his

26 Ibid., 51.

nifty, new wood-handled axe to cut down all the rest of the trees as well. The trees bemoan their short sighted, mean-spirited and ultimately self-destructive stupidity.

In another pairing from the central part of the book Gellert takes aim at the Supreme Court's antagonistic relationship with Roosevelt's New Deal legislation. When Gellert was preparing this book, key New Deal legislative initiatives had been recently invalidated (e.g., the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 was ruled unconstitutional in 1935) and 'no one could be sure that the nascent Social Security Act of 1935 would survive its infancy'.²⁷ Roosevelt's electoral victory did not disable opponents of his plans and arguing in the Courts seemed to be one of their weapons of choice. In 1937 (after the publication of *Aesop Said So* in 1936) Roosevelt responded with his (infamous and unsuccessful) push to expand the number of justices to make it a friendlier body (the 'court-packing' plan). Gellert addresses the political power of the Courts with a picture of three papers labelled 'Act of Congress' impaled on the blade of a broadsword from which a dismantled scale of justice dangles precariously. It is a devastating political cartoon. What is the added value of marrying this image to a fable, that is, to treating it as an illustration? Gellert adds the title 'The Supreme Court' to the original fable, 'Swallow in the Chancery'. The tale is about a bird that builds a nest in the eaves of a Court of Law assuming it would be an eminently safe environment only to see her fledglings devoured by a serpent that was lurking nearby unseen. The image of the Acts of Congress impaled on the Sword of Justice is an accusation. The fable proposes a specific warning. The swallow was wrongly confident that the Court of Law would provide a nurturing environment. The fable and image together caution readers to expect carefully obscured impediments to working class interests to be lying in wait in unobvious places. The image and text together also express deep disappointment in liberal democratic institutions.

The middle of the book continues with its tour of obstacles in the path of working class progress. It is here that we find the image Gellert chose to reproduce on the cover of the book (Fig. 3). Accordingly, we can assume that it exemplifies Gellert's ambitions for the book as a whole. The figure in the image is clearly a portrait of William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper mogul widely credited with inventing 'yellow journalism', who styled himself a diplomat and spokesman for American ideals (he is the historical inspiration for the subject of the film, *Citizen Kane*). It depicts a demonic Hearst in the act of defiling the American flag, blood dripping from his hands. The flag is also in distress; it is hanging backwards. Since he titles the accompanying fable 'Hearst and Columbia' and places a swastika on Hearst's lapel, it is likely that Gellert's image refers specifically to two recent events involving Hearst. First, Hearst notoriously travelled to Germany to meet with Hitler in 1934 ostensibly to mollify the Nazis. Second, a year later, his newspaper denounced a Columbia University professor for being a communist in an (unsuccessful) effort to

27 Larry DeWitt, Social Security Administration Historian, 1999. <http://www.ssa.gov/history/court.html>.



Fig. 3. Hugo Gellert, 'Hearst and Columbia (The Garbage Man and the Laundress),' *Aesop Said So* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936).

drum up a full-blown 'red scare' at the University and in the city. The faculty stood up to him and organized a multi-campus effort to discredit his attack on academic freedom.²⁸ Gellert defiantly splashes red across the image (produced in colour on the cover, in black and white in the body of the text next to the fable). The image attacks political naiveté about fascism and, most dramatically, the undue — and damaging — influence of a plutocrat over public discourse. The image alone is damning. But it gains more general meaning when attached to a fable and the voice of Aesop. We can see this at work in the modifications Gellert performs on the source he used to craft the so-called 'original' fable he places alongside this piercing cartoon of Hearst.

Gellert takes a fable that his source entitled 'The Collier and the Fuller' about two workers — a coal miner with room to spare in his house and a wool cleaner who declines his offer of free accommodation because he fears the dirt will ruin his work and undermine his livelihood as a cloth-maker — and transforms it into a tale he reports being traditionally titled, 'The Garbage Man and the Laundress'. He seems to have made up this title and to have refashioned the text of the fable. The story he tells is about a man in possession of surfeit of rooms in his home and a sceptical

28 'Hearst Calls on Hitler,' *New York Times*, 17 September 1934; '20 Educators Ask Curb on "Red Scare." Hearst Accused of Attempt to "Drum Up" Agitation in Schools. Inquiry in Congress Urged,' *New York Times*, 24 December 1934.

young tradeswoman. Gellert leverages gender difference succinctly to signal unequal power and sexuality concisely to suggest vulnerability. Gellert's version of the text for 'Hearst and Columbia' is brief:

A Garbage Man, who had more room in his house than he could use for himself, proposed to a comely Laundress to come and take up quarters with him.

'Thank you,' said she, 'but I must decline your offer, for I fear that as fast as I wash my clothes you will soil them again.'

Hearst is the Garbage Man; he traffics in dirt. Columbia University is the sharp Laundress who sees through the sinister offer and easily pegs him, not dirt, as the source of a threat to her wellbeing (a laundress can deal with dirt). The cautionary tale lauds the keen eye, good sense and confidence of the less powerful Laundress. Hearst's recent acts of fake patriotism, abuse of first amendment rights and manipulations of public anxieties now seem, when viewed through the lens of the fable, but dramatic examples of ubiquitous dangers that working people must navigate in their everyday lives. Ventriloquizing Aesop, Gellert makes Hearst stand for an archetypal problem faced by the less powerful in decadent capitalism and makes the fable provide, in Kurke's words, an 'alibi' for acts of 'cunning resistance'.

The other fables in the middle of the book similarly work to expose the range of forces and people that regularly profit from the oppression of the working classes (as well as from the complacency of the working class). This includes fascist sympathizers, religious leaders, fat cat industrialists, and military contractors. The tone changes a bit towards the end of the book. The two pairings of fable and image he relies on to close the book are uplifting, even inspirational. For example, in the penultimate illustrated fable in the book Gellert presents 'The Bees, the Drones and the Wasp' as a way succinctly to express the central proposition of the labor theory of value and to join other American communists in identifying President Lincoln as an ally of working men and women in their present struggles.²⁹ The fable tells of how a wise wasp settled a dispute over ownership of a honeycomb in favour of the honeybees that laboured to make it over the demands of drones that now claim it. The image (Fig. 4) shows the Lincoln Monument (dedicated only fourteen years

29 Lincoln was often invoked by organized labour to assert the alignment of American values and labour's interests (as well as by antifascist activists in the 1930s, e.g., the 'Lincoln Brigades', the self-ascribed name of a group of Americans who volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War). They often highlight Lincoln's writing in support of labour. For example, from 'Reply to a Committee from the Workingmen's Association of New York', 21 March 1864, we find: 'The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds.' In this same 'Reply' Lincoln quoted from his 'Annual Message to Congress', 3 December 1861 as follows: 'Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital' (see Gellert's footnote in Figure 4). See Gates (2009: 295).

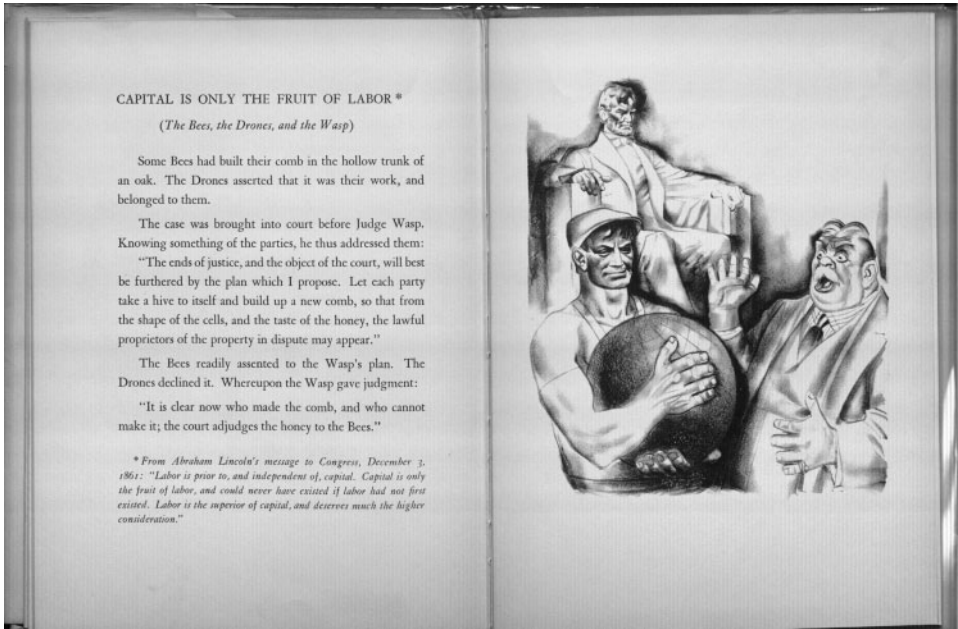


Fig. 4. Hugo Gellert, 'Capital is Only the Fruit of Labor (The Bees, the Drones, and the Wasp),' *Aesop Said So* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936).

earlier in 1922) with the president's gaze rendered so that he is staring down a stylized plutocrat. Standing opposite the plutocrat, a worker cradles a globe, his gaze rendered forward straight and true. The plutocrat's grasping hands are empty. To make his meaning abundantly clear, Gellert explicitly uses a quotation from Lincoln's speech to Congress in 1861 in which he embraced the labour theory of value as the 'updated' title of the fable: 'Capital is Only the Fruit of Labor', and adds a footnote citing Lincoln more extensively.

In the final pairing of fable and illustration in the book Gellert presents 'The Bundle of Sticks' under the additional, up-to-date title, 'The Farm-Labor Party' (Fig. 5). In this well-known fable a father demonstrates the truth of the adage, 'union is strength',³⁰ to his argumentative sons by showing them that individual sticks are strong when part of a bundle but brittle severally. It is possible that by closing his book with this tale about solidarity Gellert means to leave his reader with a direct, uplifting lesson. But the illustration viewed in the context of the time suggests that Gellert's concern in mobilizing this key fable at the end of the book is also dire. After World War I and throughout the 1920s the Federated Farm-Labor Party tried and failed to establish itself as a strong third-party alternative in US politics by co-operating with the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA). In the 1930s there were attempts to revitalize it with and without the participation of the CPUSA but

³⁰ This is how Gellert's source summarizes the moral of this fable. James (1925: 85).



Fig. 5. Hugo Gellert, 'Farm-Labor Party (The Bundle of Sticks)', *Aesop Said So* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1936).

never with very much success or staying power. Gellert visually links the fable's well-known lesson about unity to the struggling Farm-Labor Party's vision of worker solidarity and American party politics; workers and parties must embrace multiple industries and, in keeping with its attachment to the CPUSA, take a view that extends beyond national borders.³¹ The image mingles symbols of different kinds of labour (wrench, book, shovel, pitchfork) together with iconography of both Soviet and American ideals (hammer and sickle, quotes from the Declaration of Independence, a torch that recalls the Statue of Liberty). In particular, a massive hammer held by a strong arm is front and centre. A sickle sits at the lower right, its curved edge cradling the symbols of labour assembled behind the hammer and in front of the words, 'Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness'. The image is not flat. The sickle, hammer, and symbols of labour are suspended in the space between the flame and the words. Gellert's fusion of the elements of this image seems carefully designed to suggest the importance of including the CPUSA in mainstream

31 See Lovin (1971). For popular expression of Farm-Labor's goals see 'Farm-Labor Train' by Woody Guthrie. Lyrics: http://woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Farmer-Labor_Train.htm, last accessed 6 January 2016. A recording: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/woody-guthrie/farmer-labor-train/american-folk-childrens-struggle-protest/music/track/smithsonian>, last accessed 6 January 2016.

American political struggles. He attaches the unassailable truth associated with this traditional fable specifically to the cooperative work of the Farm-Labor Party and warns that allowing it to flounder (as was the case) is akin to ignoring the wisdom of this celebrated fable. Gellert's modifications to the text of the fable in his source fit this account. He condenses the text as he found it, changing some language in large part to modernize the vocabulary. What he keeps is telling. Gellert retains the references to the father's efforts 'to reconcile' his quarrelsome sons. He also saves references to the efforts to break bundled sticks as 'in vain' and to references to efforts to break sticks 'one by one' as happening 'with the greatest ease'. Finally, he reproduces the final sentence from his source word for word: 'Thus you, my sons, as long as you remain united, are a match for all your enemies; but differ and separate, and you are undone'. Gellert uses the fable to take the view not only of worker solidarity generally but of American communists disempowered from the effort to resuscitate the Farm-Labor Party during a fractious period. The closing image and fable together thus use Aesop to voice a warning against the diffusion of labour organizations and political parties that claim to take a stand for workers. The mingling of symbols in the image recalls the bundling of sticks.

Aesop Said So

Gellert's effort to raise a voice from antiquity in support of organized labour and progressive politics should be viewed in the context of other appropriations of antiquity in public art in New York City at the time. *Aesop Said So* appears to respond to, even to contest, the way ancient models had only very recently been marshalled in two high-profile works of art installed in Rockefeller Centre — Paul Manship's gilded statue of Prometheus for its grand public plaza and Diego Rivera's mural 'Man at the Crossroads' for the lobby of its signature skyscraper.

After the crash of 1929 the investors behind the construction of the ambitious urban development site that we now know as Rockefeller Centre dropped out, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the vastly wealthy heir to the Standard Oil fortune, forged ahead on his own. He envisioned the 22-acre site as a glorious, forward-looking, optimistic addition to New York City, a beacon of sorts for a community in the throes of the depression that would include office towers, a public plaza, shopping concourse, skating rink, and concert hall.³² The plans for development included a great deal of artwork to be integrated into the design and production of the entire Centre, and so its planning and construction employed scores of artists, from textile designers working on carpets and draperies to mural painters to decorate the lobbies and sculptors to adorn the public plazas. For the centre of the main plaza the designers commissioned the most celebrated sculptor of the period, Paul Manship, to produce a gilded statue of Prometheus (Fig. 6). Inscribed on the marble wall behind the statue was a quotation from the tragedian Aeschylus that

³² See Okrent (2003).



Fig. 6. Paul Manship, Prometheus, Rockefeller Center, NY, USA, 1933. Photo credit: Andrea Jemolo/Scala/Art Resource, NY.

reads, ‘Prometheus, teacher in every art, brought the fire that hath proved to mortals a means to mighty ends’.

Manship’s piece invokes Prometheus to celebrate the technological achievements of ‘mankind’ in the modern era — that is, all the new arts, industries and engineering marvels that signal progress, for example, aviation, journalism, railroads, radio and television, performing arts and film — all of which were the subject of more focused artistic attention in other parts of the Rockefeller Centre.³³ But I suspect Gellert also saw the gilded statue in particular as an effort to liken the great philanthropist behind the development of Rockefeller Centre — John D. Rockefeller, Junior — and risk-taking captains of industry in general to the great mythological risk-taking benefactor of humankind, Prometheus. This identification of Prometheus with titans of industry would have deeply disturbed Gellert. He was no doubt aware of Marx’s association of the critique of capitalism with the daring behaviour of Prometheus and of Marx’s explicit appropriation of Prometheus in chapter 23 of *Capital*.³⁴ Plus, as I discussed above, Gellert lauded Lenin and the Bolshevik

33 Roussel (2005). In addition, some Rockefeller Centre artwork reflecting on the nascent radio and television industries visually represents the intellectual processes of reception. See Monoson (2013).

34 On Marx’s identification with Prometheus see Manuel (1997: 22, 53, 87, 132).

Revolution in general as a ‘new Prometheus rising in the East’ in his own foreword to *Capital in Lithographs*. The full passage reads as follows:

But out of the East rises a new Prometheus. And all the Gods of the World cannot chain him! The great disciple of Karl Marx, Lenin, led the Russian workers and peasants who created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. And these workers became masters of their own destiny. The Young Giant with his mighty hands builds the future of mankind and bright lights flare up in his wake.

This passage in *Capital in Lithographs*, a book Gellert published within a year of the installation of Manship’s statue on the plaza, contests the association of Prometheus with American capitalists. In Gellert’s view, the ‘new Prometheus’ is Lenin. But nothing in *Aesop Said So* specifically affirms Gellert’s insistence on the communists’ claim on Prometheus. Rather, in *Aesop Said So* Gellert attends little to the Promethean task of imagining a better future in favour focusing on the lowly, hard work of critique of present historical circumstances. In a sense Aesop displaces Prometheus as Gellert’s preferred ancient referent. Aesop’s humble origins and authority as an incisive observer of unequal power relations in everyday life made him well suited to Gellert’s critical project.³⁵

Gellert’s interest in Aesop also contrasts with the way Diego Rivera mobilized the authority of antiquity in his mural for the lobby of the Rockefeller Centre’s main office tower, ‘Man at the Crossroads: Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future’, which was under way in the same period (Figs. 7 and 8). The gist of the mural’s sweeping political commentary is not particularly hard to discern. It depicts humankind’s progress from oppression, class conflict, war and misery to the promise of a peace, solidarity and prosperity, and elements of its composition make clear and dramatic reference to the legacy of classical antiquity. Representations of two fictive classical sculptures of seated authorities anchor the design on the extreme left and right. They invite the viewer to consider how far consideration of the classical past should inform contemporary aspirations. Rivera’s answer is not encouraging. While the overall theme of the composition is very optimistic — science, technology, and social theory are placing a glorious future within reach — classical motifs are not used to shape

35 He also attempted this in an earlier book, *Comrade Gulliver* (Gellert 1935), published between *Marx in Lithographs* and *Aesop Said So*. ‘Gellert’s ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ was an illustrated account of travel by a Soviet citizen to that “strange country” of the United States, and used episodic stories to highlight deplorable economic and social conditions in depression-era America. The accompanying images sharply condemn corporate corruption and influence-peddling, racism, lynching, prison chain-gangs, and other social ills.’ Description from the catalogue of the Wolfsonian Library, Florida International University: [http://wolfsonianfiulibrary.wordpress.com/2012/02/02/the-spanish-american-war-wwi-and-literature-of-the-great-depression/Comrade Gulliver](http://wolfsonianfiulibrary.wordpress.com/2012/02/02/the-spanish-american-war-wwi-and-literature-of-the-great-depression/Comrade-Gulliver) can be viewed at Graphic Witness: <http://graphicwitness.org/contemp/gellert.htm>.

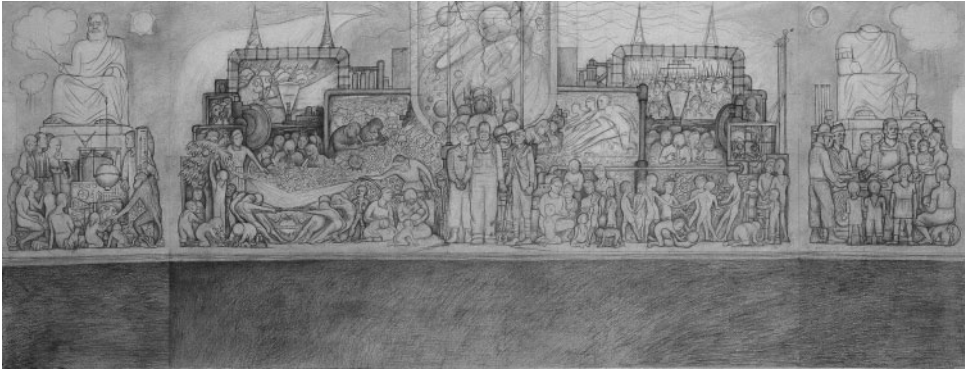


Fig. 7. Diego Rivera, Preliminary Design for 'Man at the Crossroads'. Pencil on Paper. November 1932. The Museum of Modern Art, NY.



Fig. 8. Diego Rivera, 'Man at the Crossroads', Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 1934.

inspiring new models. Instead, Rivera uses signifiers of classical antiquity to suggest the weighty, oppressive traditions we must struggle against. For example, the fictive statue on the left appears to be based on interpretations of Phidias's Zeus at Olympia. But in Rivera's mural the sceptre and winged Nike associated with Phidias' Zeus have been replaced by the bayonets of World War I fighters and warplanes in flight and, instead of a thunderbolt, a cloud of smoke emanates from the raised arm. Rivera also renders the figure without hands, denying it any association with creative, productive forces. The second fictive statue on the right is decapitated and caresses a Roman fasces stamped with a Nazi swastika. Workers enjoying the delights of a peaceful and just future surround this fictive figure. The severed head resembles Caesar and serves as a bench for a single resting worker in the lower right corner. The composition as a whole seems to urge rejection of

classical models as a resource to be mined for the purpose of modelling modern aspirations.³⁶

Rivera finished the mural and was paid for his labours but it never went on public display. Incensed by Rivera's addition of a portrait of Lenin to its composition (in a way that fits with Gellert's view of Lenin as a Promethean figure), and unable to get Rivera to agree to modify the work to his satisfaction, Rockefeller chose to have the mural removed. Since it was produced in true fresco, removal meant complete demolition. Its destruction caused a huge storm of protest and is often remembered today as the greatest blunder in the history of art patronage in the USA. The development of Rockefeller Centre employed scores of artists well known for radical politics and active in organized labour. But the celebration of Lenin seems to have just been too much. The design of this mural is known only because Rivera duplicated the composition in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico in 1934, where it remains on view today. But Gellert knew the New York version of Rivera's mural well. He recalls in an interview archived at the Smithsonian that he was at that time working on his own mural for a different building that was part of the Rockefeller Centre development (the Century Theatre, which was torn down in 1954) and often visited Rivera while his mural was in progress. He reports having talked to Rivera about this commission being something not really done 'for a private collection' but instead 'for the people'. After its destruction Gellert led a large group of artists in withdrawing from other exhibits at Rockefeller Centre and picketing.³⁷

36 The location of the mural in the lobby stresses the marginality of its classical elements. The mural was divided into three panels, a central one in the main lobby and two side panels at 90 degrees in adjacent hallways. The two fictive statues were installed on the side panels. Note that Rivera's own later reflections on the mural's meaning do not even address his use of classical images in the composition (in this quote the side panels are referred to as 'left' and 'right' because the reproduction in Mexico is on a single horizontal plane): 'The center of my mural showed a worker at the controls of a large machine. In front of him, emerging from space was a large hand holding a globe on which the dynamics of chemistry and biology, the recombination of atoms, and the division of a cell, were represented schematically. . . . Above the germinating soil at the bottom, I projected two visions of civilization. On the left of the crossed ellipses, I showed a nightclub scene of the debauched rich, a battlefield with men in the holocaust of war, and unemployed workers in a demonstration being clubbed by the police. On the right, I painted corresponding scenes of life in a socialist country: a May Day demonstration of marching, singing workers; an athletic stadium filled with girls exercising their bodies; and a figure of Lenin, symbolically clasping the hands of a black American and a white Russian soldier and workers, as allies of the future.' (Rivera 1960).

37 Interview, pp. 14–16. 5 April 1984, Hugo Gellert Papers Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A good, brief account of the fiasco can be read at: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/diegorivera_a.html, accessed 6 January 2016.

There is no evidence to suggest that Gellert self-consciously sought to contest the way ancient resources were appropriated in the work of Manship and Rivera or that he aimed to support the idea that antiquity is multi-vocal. However, we can observe that in *Aesop Said So* Gellert does something new and interesting in the art of the time. He looks to antiquity for something other than a mythological framework for thinking about critique and progress and its artistic representation. He claims to have located there, in the classical past, an actual material instance of a comrade whose wise voice remains audible today through his artistic work, that is, through the fables. As we have seen, Gellert, a self-identifying 'proletarian artist', sustains a case for finding in Aesop an ally of organized labour across time and in his fables a resource for the critique of capitalism.³⁸

Concluding remarks

Aesop's fables are so widely known across so many class and national boundaries that they can be described as a 'global cultural property'.³⁹ Gellert deploys this familiar authoritative resource as an instrument to promote the development of class-consciousness among the many segments of the American working classes (industrial, arts, farm, and service workers) and solidarity across ethnic, gender, and racial groups and organizational affiliations. His project has something in common with the way Greek prose writers usually work with Aesop as observed by Kurke. She shows that they often introduce an Aesopic tale with a specific colloquial formula that 'occurs in contexts of aggressive verbal dueling, when one speaker imagines that his statement will cleverly trump his interlocutor's words and end discussion'.⁴⁰ As we have seen, Gellert's invocation of Aesop is confident and confrontational. But Gellert does not exactly practice 'Aesopic' writing as a 'political disguise', as Kurke describes its practice in ancient contexts,⁴¹ or in the modern sense of adapting fables to fashion expressions of dissent just obscure enough to evade censors or avert

38 His turn to Aesop recalls his account of his impressions of Paris as an art student before World War I. What delighted him most, he reported in 1984, were not the pieces in the Louvre but rather the large advertising posters up in public places, the fact of 'art in the streets'. Interview, p. 4. 5 April 1984, Hugo Gellert Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. 'Proletarian artist' comes from the pamphlet, '*Hugo Gellert. 1892-1985. People's Artist*,' Hugo Gellert Memorial Committee, New York, May 1986. Special Collections, Northwestern University Library. Gellert's political interest in the actual existence in antiquity of a politically useful voice might have some parallel in his brother Lawrence's interest in documenting black protest songs in the South. Lawrence made a serious contribution to the collection of field-recordings of African-American blues and spirituals but his further claim to have also found black protest songs was in later years discredited as fake. See Cornforth (2013).

39 Hall (forthcoming 2015: p. 6 of the preprint version posted at http://www.classicsandclass.info/?attachment_id=1737).

40 Kurke (2011: 253).

41 Ibid., 11.

reprisals. Instead, Gellert's use of Aesop exhibits a complex attitude towards the doubleness characteristic of work in an 'Aesopic' vein. Annabel Patterson defines Aesopic work as 'a flexible and constantly renewable system of metaphorical substitutions for actual events, persons, or political concepts that can, *but need not*, be recognized as such'. She stresses that the key feature of the 'Aesopic' is the clandestine character of its expression of critique.⁴² As the editors of a recent volume put it, Aesopic work delivers critical reflections on perceived injustices and their obfuscation 'in a camouflaged or encoded fashion' and assumes the presence of an able and willing reader or viewer 'to decode the Aesopic encryption'.⁴³ It is true that Gellert's *Aesop Said So* speaks indirectly as another, imaginary text; it is a political tract speaking as an illustrated collection of timeless ancient moral fables. But Gellert does not adapt fables to camouflage his critique of his own time or to take refuge in a furtive artistic realm. Instead, in *Aesop Said So* he offers illustrations that both decode for his readers modern meanings in the allegories and name contemporary targets. In a manner that does resonate with Aesopic practice as scholars have described it, Gellert assumes an able and willing reader/viewer who is sufficiently alert to current affairs to appreciate the political cartoons in this graphic political pamphlet. He implores them to join him in seeing in the fables guideposts to more layers of radical critique.

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⁴² Patterson (1991: 52). She notes that Marx alludes to fables only to expose practices of obfuscation (1991: 152).

⁴³ Reifarth and Morrissey (2011).

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