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## Redefining the New Deal: Some Thoughts on the Political and Cultural Perspectives of Revisionism

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Thirty years after the publication of Arthur Schlesinger's *The Crisis of the Old Order* and two decades after the "New Left" provoked a modicum of self-examination by established historians of the New Deal, there is still no general revisionist work or interpretation of the 1930s of the stature of Schlesinger, Leuchtenburg or Freidel. Despite twenty years of revisionist challenges, the notion of the 1930s as an affirmative and progressive era in American history remains dominant and commands broad acceptance. Revisionist analysis has appeared marginal to the dominant interpretations of the New Deal and has been either easily accommodated or effortlessly dismissed by the "liberal historical establishment." This does not validate the dominant discourse so much as suggest that dissenting historians have pursued unrewarding lines of enquiry in challenging prevailing orthodoxy about the nature and significance of the New Deal. Whatever their differences, revisionists have shared with the "liberal establishment" the assumption that it was public policy which ensured the State's survival during the severe economic crisis of the 1930s and which provides the touchstone for historical evaluation of the New Deal. In the course of this review of the overarching concerns of historical writing about the New Deal it is intended to suggest that new perspectives and points of reference are required, and are being developed, to reinvigorate revisionist historiography of the New Deal period, and to shed light, in particular, on the State's ability to withstand crisis. As the debate over slavery was enlivened and sharpened by the introduction of cultural perspectives, so historical analysis of the New Deal stands to derive similar benefit.

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*Journal of American Studies*, 22 (1988), 1, 189-415 Printed in Great Britain

concentrations of private wealth and power in industrialized societies. State power is prescriptive only in that it is used in the last resort when private wealth is unwilling or unable to maintain minimum standards of living or security for its dependants. The New Deal's record on relief, maximum hours, minimum wages and social security is often used to illustrate the point. The State also seeks to redress the influence of corporate wealth by granting similar collective advantages to non-dominant groups. The New Deal's encouragement of collective bargaining and its support for rural rehabilitation, for example, are said to reflect the State's commitment to using its power to help disadvantaged groups help themselves. Despite experiments in public ownership, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the establishment of potentially radical agencies such as the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration, liberals are often reluctant to concede even the New Deal's ideological contradictions. Rather, the New Deal's tensions are concealed beneath vague conceptual canopies, such as Arthur Schlesinger's "vital center" whereby conflict becomes a self-actualising aspect of the political strategy. It is invited and welcomed in the spirit of a pluralistic society.

✓ The person of Franklin D. Roosevelt figures prominently in liberals' treatment of the New Deal period. The titles of general works attest to his importance. Schlesinger's trilogy is collectively entitled *The Age of Roosevelt*, while Freidel's series, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, is structured so that the New Deal marks the culmination of its subject's life.<sup>7</sup> Both William Leuchtenburg and D. K. Adams preface the titles of their works with the name of Roosevelt. Professor Adams provides a disclaimer to the effect that his study is not an "exercise in hagiography," yet over one-third of his Historical Association pamphlet is devoted to Roosevelt's background before 1933 and to his formative political and philosophical influences.<sup>8</sup> The implication is clear - that these biographical issues are important to an understanding of the New Deal because Roosevelt is so central to it. Liberals assert that if John Nance Garner had received the Democratic nomination in 1932 the New Deal might not have ensued, and the role of Roosevelt is further valorized by the ongoing comparisons between the counter-depression programmes of his administrations and those of his predecessor, Herbert Hoover.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 4 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952, 1954, 1956, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> D. K. Adams, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (Saffron Walden: The Historical Association, 1979), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression. America, 1929-1941* (New York: Time Books, 1984), 124-25.

Roosevelt's canonization is not merely a matter of idolatry. As pluralists, liberals must emphasize the contribution of individuals and groups to the origins, formulation and direction of State policy. The classic pluralist conceptualization of the New Deal is James MacGregor Burns's "broker state" in which federal policy is determined by the interplay of interest groups with varying influence and resources, the political process which makes expedient evaluations of groups' demands, and a general guiding spirit which determines the overall direction of government policy.<sup>10</sup> The figure of Roosevelt prevents the "broker state" from being reduced to a clinical model of systems analysis which, to the cynical, might resemble the machine which fed Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Roosevelt has served as a symbol for this guiding spirit in the 1930s which directed State policy towards progressive and humane goals.<sup>11</sup>

✓ This duality of idealism and functionalism is a prominent feature of liberal historical writing. Perhaps reflecting the state of social science in the 1950s, the questions which liberals have traditionally posed about the New Deal have been couched in terms of brokerage. The "two New Deals" debate is the most obvious example. Yet there is an idealism in liberals' writing, expressed in their concern with the issue of continuity within the reforming impulse from Populism onwards, which seems to signify their conviction that evolutionary change is directed to some ideal, just society in the future.

✓ During the later years of the 1960s many prevailing assumptions of liberal historiography were challenged by the Left. The so called "New Left" emerged during a period of disillusionment with liberalism's idealism and capacity. America's involvement in Vietnam and the shortcomings of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programme suggested not only the limitations of liberalism but the inherent contradictions of an ideology which endeavoured to serve two masters (capital and the general welfare). Influenced by the romantic idealism of the decade, the Left was contemptuous of the technocratic functionalism of the modern State for which "modernization" had become the "can-do" keyword of American liberalism. Furthermore, the notion of a charismatic, reforming presidency, so appealing to Schlesinger, had fewer attractions for a generation whose historical consciousness was developed, or reconstructed, in the era of the Pentagon Papers, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and Watergate.

<sup>10</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1956), 191-202.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth C. Lynn provides a trenchant critique of liberals' concentration on the presidency as the prime mover for reform in "The Schlesinger Thesis," *Commentary*, March 1987, 46-52.

Viewed from the late 1960s the New Deal appeared to exemplify liberalism's limitations. Revisionists converted into a major point of criticism their liberal counterparts' celebration of the New Deal as anti-ideological. The New Deal was condemned for its *ad hoc* experimentalism. Howard Zinn believed that the New Deal did not ally experimentation to either long-term goals or democratic concepts.<sup>12</sup> As such, in the words of Barton Bernstein, the New Deal was not "a dividing line in the American System." In his well-known essay of 1968, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," Bernstein argued that instead of transforming capitalism the New Deal's reforms were instrumental in maintaining it. For Bernstein the New Deal's failures were as conspicuous as its achievements, and its absences were even more revealing of its project and purpose. The New Deal never questioned private enterprise; failed to redistribute income and wealth; refused to act against the southern "race system," and buttressed the power of the dominant business class. Bernstein's essay catalogued opportunities spurned by the New Deal's policy makers: nationalization of the banking system in 1933; massive public housing construction; the redistribution of wealth through effective, progressive taxation, and so on. These aims were beyond the scope of a political programme whose aim was to recuperate capitalism by "containing" the pressure for change within the safe limits of New Deal liberalism. Essentially, the New Deal incorporated the discontented without ever fully addressing the sources of their grievances. The New Deal provided the illusion of change. Its distinctiveness, as Bernstein expressed it, was of "tone and spirit" rather than of substance.<sup>13</sup>

Paralleling this critical scrutiny of the New Deal occurred a reconsideration of the role of Roosevelt. Roosevelt's limitations as both an intellectual and a social theorist had long been recognized but had been disregarded by liberal historians. Since the 1960s scholarly research has also underscored his shortcomings in the pursuit of liberal goals. Roosevelt has been revealed as a reluctant champion of such important items on the liberal agenda as collective bargaining and deficit spending, and political considerations made him unsympathetic to extending liberalism significantly into the province of race relations.<sup>14</sup> As an

<sup>12</sup> Howard Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1966). See also, "The Grateful Society," *Columbia University Forum* 10 (Spring 1967), 28-44.

<sup>13</sup> Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 263-88.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969); Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression: The Problem of Economic Recovery* (Westport: Greenwood, 1970).

alternative to this apparently cynical political practice some critics looked either to Congress or within the field staffs of the alphabetical agencies, such as FERA and WPA, to exemplify the idealism of the New Deal. As Paul Conkin wrote in 1967: "The best of the New Deal was not at the level of political visibility but hidden in the agencies and subagencies."<sup>15</sup> The conclusion of this line of reasoning was that the New Deal was a product of innumerable contributions and was not the accomplishment of a single individual.

The early work of dissenting historians was vulnerable to criticism on the grounds that its appraisals focussed on what the New Deal was not and could never have been. "Total repudiation of capitalism becomes the sole test by which to measure the New Deal," Jerold Auerbach wrote in 1969. Auerbach questioned the New Left's historical judgement because it sacrificed scholarly detachment for polemical engagement. By imposing *ex-post-facto* aspirations of the 1960s onto the New Deal, historians of the Left ignored the political realities of the 1930s, and by dismissing the New Deal's achievements out of hand, they failed to consider that the New Deal was not responsible for the failures of subsequent administrations to elaborate its progressive initiatives.<sup>16</sup> Carl Degler also criticized the New Left for asserting the present over the past in its evaluations of historical change. The effect was twofold. The American past was reduced to "nothing more than a stately, homogenized progression from the seventeenth century to the present," and standards were established to evaluate progress which no reform movement in American history could meet.<sup>17</sup> Revisionist criticism could also be ascribed to generational tensions. Irwin Unger suggested that, as the source and totem of the modern welfare state, rejection of the New Deal by the New Left implied a repudiation of "their fathers and their fathers' faith." Revisionism could, therefore, be construed as "an adolescent blow for independence" by Clio's apprentices.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1970s revisionists' lines of enquiry were adjusted to meet these criticisms. Many historians who sought to provide an overview of the New Deal were not content merely to map its deficiencies. Instead they focussed on the forces which had shaped State policy during the decade. This required an understanding of the operation of the capitalist State, its relation to the social formation, and the interaction of both to produce

<sup>15</sup> Paul K. Conkin, *The New Deal* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 51.

<sup>16</sup> Jerold S. Auerbach, "New Deal, Old Deal or Raw Deal: Some Thoughts on New Left Historiography," *Journal of Southern History* 35 (February 1969), 18-30.

<sup>17</sup> Degler, *Out of Our Past*, 411-12.

<sup>18</sup> Irwin Unger, "The 'New Left' and American History: Some Recent Trends in United States Historiography," *American Historical Review* 72 (July 1967), 1253.

public policy. These new directions have brought about an impasse in the dialogue between liberals and the Left because, by and large, revisionists employ Marxist (or neo-Marxist) analysis which assumes that class conflict is central to society and is the principal agency of historical change. This involves not only a different set of assumptions and distinctive modes of enquiry, but different approaches to the use of theory and nomenclature. Divisions between liberal and Marxist are expressed not only in terms of historical interpretation but in methodological practice.

Revisionist scholars of the New Deal have been a diverse group. Some of the earliest were historians who were impressed with the force of revisionist interpretations of the Progressive Era and the claims of Robert Wiebe, Gabriel Kolko and James Weinstein that reform promoted the interests of the capitalist class. Others have been political scientists influenced by the "power elite" theories of C. Wright Mills, or political theorists exposed to the range of recent theoretical work on the State by Ralph Milliband and Nicos Poulantzas. There are also students of political economy who subscribe to what Louis Galambos refers to as "the Organizational Synthesis," which views functional capitalist rationalization as the mainspring of twentieth-century American history.<sup>19</sup> Despite their diverse influences these scholars have been uniformly aware of the significance of the corporation in American economic and political life, writ in large emblematic terms during the 1960s in the figure of the "military-industrial complex." To many of them it appeared that the source of public policy was neither the Oval Office nor Capitol Hill but the boardrooms of America's giant corporations. They also felt that corporate leaders were not the reactionary caricatures of liberals' creation, but sophisticated, flexible and capable of responding to challenge by expropriating progressive issues and causes. As they could foster America's involvement in Vietnam, so they could promote the Great Society, Black Capitalism, or the New Deal.

Gabriel Kolko believed that the capitalist class actively sought to conjoin the interests of business with the political power of the State during the crisis of the 1930s. Cooperation with the State was consistent with the collectivist tendencies within American capitalism during the twentieth century and was a logical development after the failure of voluntary self-regulation through the trade association movement during the 1920s. Through the National Recovery Administration, banking and investment reforms, and labour legislation the New Deal established

<sup>19</sup> Louis A. Galambos, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," *Business History Review*, 44 (Autumn 1970), 279-90.

"new institutional mechanisms" to promote business stabilization and profitability, and a "new order of administrative politics" was created whereby government authority buttressed private power.<sup>20</sup> As William Domhoff expressed it: "The power elite did not merely pervert and take over the regulatory agencies—they planned and developed them as an alternative to public ownership, destructive competition, and uneven state regulation."<sup>21</sup> According to Domhoff and Ronald Radosh even the New Deal's progressive reforms served the interests of the capitalist class. These benefits were neither retrospective nor incidental to the New Deal's enterprise, they were actually designed to serve these ends. Radosh contended that the New Deal's reforms were not the pragmatic initiatives of a humane and liberal programme, for he wrote: "They were solidly based, carefully worked out pieces of legislation. They were of such character that they would be able to create a long-lasting mythology about the existence of a pluralistic American democracy." In effect, however, they were products of a "modernized corporate capitalism."<sup>22</sup>

Underpinning Radosh's argument is the assumption that the State serves the dominant capitalist class not only because, *ipso facto*, it is so central to the creation of wealth and employment, but because the capitalist class is influential within the State itself. Namely, it is instrumental in determining public policy. During the crisis of the 1930s, he argued, an enlightened class-conscious vanguard of corporate leaders appreciated the necessity of using the State's power to protect the interests of capital accumulation. This required both concessions to non-dominant groups and a willingness of the capitalist class overall to accept them. A locus for the corporate liberal elite was the Business Council, founded in 1933, and although attached to the Department of Commerce, financed privately. Composed of chief executive officers from General Motors, Standard Oil, General Electric, and other major corporations, the Business Council provided the means for corporate liberals to associate themselves with the Federal Government. Significantly, the Council provided members for the Industrial Advisory Board of the NRA, which influenced the formulation of codes of fair competition, and the Committee on Economic Security which developed the Social Security Act.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 122-56.

<sup>21</sup> William Domhoff, *The Higher Circles: The Governing Class in America* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 250.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Radosh, "The Myth of the New Deal," in Radosh and Murray N. Rothbard, *A New History of Leviathan* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 186-87.

In this view the labour reforms of the New Deal were not wrested from the capitalist class but strategically conceded by farsighted corporate liberals. They sought to gain numerous advantages for business by advancing progressive reforms. These included industrial self-regulation (through the NRA), the elimination of "unfair" trade practices of low-wage competitors, and, most important, the incorporation of labour within the framework of corporate capitalism through a disciplined and hierarchical trade union movement. Ulterior motives also conditioned the corporate elite's support for social security. Not only, as Berkowitz and McQuaid have shown, was the Act of 1935 based on the accumulated experience of corporations with private insurance schemes, but it served to pre-empt the more threatening demands of the Townsend Movement. Thus, in the words of Radosh: "Social reform [was] an essential component of the corporate state."<sup>23</sup>

The star of the corporate liberal interpretation has long since waned. The corporate vanguard were always outnumbered by conservatives on the Business Council. Executive Officers such as Alfred Sloan of General Motors, Myron Taylor of U.S. Steel, and Thomas Watson of IBM did not share the progressive views of General Electric's Gerard Swope or Walter Teagle of Standard Oil. Indeed, the American Liberty League was financed by Dupont Chemical and General Motors, both of whom were represented on the Business Council. Neither was there much unity and discipline within the capitalist class in general. Instrumentalists who believed that the capitalist class authored much of the New Deal, either ignored, or dismissed as false consciousness, the overwhelming opposition to it within the business community. The New Deal's promotion of collective bargaining, however functional and consonant with capitalist interests, was strongly opposed as an unwarranted interference in labour-management relations. The Wagner Act, in particular, received almost universal condemnation, while the Social Security Act was welcomed only by those firms which could pass on the additional costs to consumers. As one critic concludes: "Major New Deal measures were passed and implemented over the opposition of the capitalists" which returns us to Arthur Schlesinger.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 169; Edward Berkowitz and Kim McQuaid, *Creating the Welfare State: The Political Economy of Twentieth-Century Reform* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 96-116; 164-65.

<sup>24</sup> Theda Skocpol, "Political Response to Capitalist Crisis: Neo-Marxist Theories of the State and the Case of the New Deal," *Politics and Society* 10 (Pt. 2, 1980), 169; Kim McQuaid, *Big Business and Presidential Power: From FDR to Reagan* (New York: William Morrow, 1982), 18-61; McQuaid, "The Frustration of Corporate Revival during the Early New Deal," *The Historian* 41 (Pt. 4, 1979), 682-704.

Another limitation of the corporate liberal theorists' interpretation was the decentring of the working class as a direct agency of change. A whole area of working-class history was submerged and diminished by the emphasis on the "potential" threat of the working class to corporate interests. The growth of the union movement; the formation of the CIO and the emergence of industrial unionism, and the disruptive campaigns for recognition cannot simply be attributed to some premeditated strategy of enlightened capitalists. If New Deal policy sought to contain labour's threat within a series of token concessions, then it had unanticipated outcomes.

In their book, *Poor People's Movements*, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward add a further dimension to revisionism by seeking to restore the working class to the centre stage as principal agency of progressive change. Following analyses of the political effects of the ghetto riots of the 1960s, the authors claim that working-class gains during the 1930s were most significant when workers defied the law and disrupted order through spontaneous strikes, demonstrations of the unemployed, and mob action. They suggest that unionization merely directed working-class pressure into sterile, bureaucratic channels where it was effectively nullified. However, serious questions have been raised about the synchronic relationship between working-class disruption and labour reforms such as the NIRA and the NLRA, and the thesis may be more significant for what it represents than for what it explains. It indicates an attempt to invest the non-dominant classes with some historical agency and shifts the focus away from the monopolization of the policy-making process by elites.<sup>25</sup>

This is not true for Theda Skocpol for whom the State is the most significant variable in her revisionist formulation. She believes that the State is relatively autonomous from the social formation.<sup>26</sup> Although the State is committed to the maintenance of capitalism and the dominance of the ruling class, it is not directly controlled by capitalists themselves. Rather, the crucial actors in the State are the "state managers" - high-ranking civil servants and politicians. Their historical role has been to expand the functions of the State, frequently in the face of capitalists' opposition. They are influenced by the class struggle, but in the sense that

<sup>25</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 41-175. Significantly, in terms of the title and purpose of his "non-establishment" general history, Howard Zinn endorses the Piven and Cloward model in his chapter on the depression: *A People's History of the United States* (London: Longman, 1980), 393.

<sup>26</sup> Note, however, her critique of Nicos Poulantzas's rigidly "functionalist" construction of the concept of "relative autonomy" as applied to the New Deal: Skocpol, 169-81.

lower class pressures serve as a catalyst for the State to expand its own prerogatives, ultimately at the expense of both capital and labour. State managers have perceived a coincidence between reform and the interests of the State. During the 1930s working-class pressure, refracted through the electoral victories of the Democratic Party between 1932 and 1936, prompted state managers to grant concessions to non-dominant groups, but concessions which would simultaneously ensure the future of capitalism and aggrandize the bureaucracy of the State through its expanded regulatory and social welfare agencies. The State only appeared to concede to working-class pressures. Essentially, it incorporated the working-class within the institutional confines of both the trade union movement and the federal welfare agencies, and once the crisis had been weathered, could roll back certain gains (as occurred in the Taft-Hartley Act) while maintaining both the reforms and the bureaucratic apparatus which had been created.

According to Skocpol, new nexuses of power emerged during the 1930s involving Democratic politicians, administrators, and trade union representatives. In terms of public policy the logical outcome of this coalition should have been the achievement of a social-democratic Keynesianism, which would maintain capitalism and the dominance of the ruling class, but which would appear progressive, and most importantly, would further expand the State's authority. However, Skocpol suggests that existing political and institutional restraints prevented such a breakthrough from occurring. The failure of the "purge" of 1938, the compromises which Roosevelt was forced to make on executive reorganization, and the growing opposition of southern, conservative Democrats to the New Deal prescribed the limits of the State's expansion during the decade.<sup>27</sup>

With Skocpol we may suspect that historical writing about the New Deal has come full circle. The principal actors of liberal historical writing are resuscitated but in the guise of "state managers"; meaning is restored to the relationship between the New Deal and its lower-class electoral constituency which Samuel Lubell identified in 1951; the State is returned to its former role as initiator of change, and the most die-hard pluralist would welcome Skocpol's strictures about the institutional and political restraints upon progressive change. Ultimately, the model which Skocpol provides is that of the "broker state" in which the State's dispensations are self-serving. And would any liberal demur from her fundamental

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 182-201.

assumption that it was state capacity which prevented a major social upheaval during the 1930s?<sup>28</sup>

### III

There are some cultural historians who would dissent from this view. In a recent essay in *The Yale Review* Lawrence Levine uses the cartoon character, Superman, to illustrate his thesis that the resilience of the capitalist system during the 1930s can be explained with reference to values and their cultural representation. In the light of the preoccupation of historians of the New Deal with omnipotent agencies—whether in the figure of Roosevelt or in the forms of the corporate elite or the State—his selection of such a superhuman icon may not appear surprising. Introduced by Action Comics in 1938, Superman can be located within conventional mythic representations of the American hero. In the lineage of Davy Crockett and Kit Carson, Clark Kent is an ordinary man with extraordinary powers. Like them he operates outside the law and established institutions but his actions serve to reinforce traditional values and help to preserve society.<sup>29</sup> Levine's point is that it is through popular culture rather than the political process that attitudes are articulated, influenced and shaped. The cinema and the radio provide other instructive examples. By the end of the decade there were 40 million regular cinema-goers in the United States and Hollywood produced about 500 features each year. Many of these served as vehicles for the affirmation of traditional values. Walt Disney's *The Three Little Pigs* extolled the work ethic; John Ford celebrated the family; Frank Capra proclaimed small-town values, while those gangster films, influenced by the censorship of the Hays Code, affirmed law and order. Moreover, by 1940 about 82 per cent of the American population had a radio in their home and were exposed, at prime time, to the racism of *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*.

Such an impressionistic list does a disservice to the complexities of the individual examples and to the problematic general relationships between cultural production and ideology. Nevertheless, it may serve to register, with simple clarity, a new set of concerns for historians of the New Deal era which focusses on the role of culture in defining the parameters of political change during the period. Marxism does not hold sway over

<sup>28</sup> Theda Skocpol and Kenneth Finegold, "State Capacity and Economic Intervention in the Early New Deal," *Political Science Quarterly* 97, 2 (Summer 1982), 255-78.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, "American Culture and the Great Depression," *Yale Review* 74, 2 (Winter 1985), 220-21.

historical writing about the politics of American culture, although developments in Marxist cultural analysis since the 1960s undoubtedly have influenced more recent studies. However, the evidence and perspectives of a growing corpus of work on the culture of the 1930s indicates the development of a reinvigorated revisionist critique of the New Deal whose outline differs from the prevailing emphasis of New Deal scholars on the State as a narrowly-defined, political phenomenon. Appropriately the source of this critique is located in 1968 and in the significance of that year for developments in cultural analysis.<sup>30</sup>

Parallels may be drawn between 1968 and 1932 to suggest that co-optive programmes by the State are not necessary for capitalism to survive crisis. The "crisis" of 1968 was overcome, not by granting concessions, but by reversing previous gains. After all, it was Nixon and not Humphrey - or even Eugene McCarthy - who was elected in that year. This suggests that the State's strengths are not restricted to the capability of its legislative and administrative structures. They are more pervasive, if less palpable, and include a crucial cultural dimension which functions to preserve the *status quo*. The "silent majority" which Richard Nixon mobilized in 1968 was galvanized by perceived threats to a natural and universal order and its central "reasonable" values, such as patriotism, law and order, male dominance, racial hierarchy, moral probity and the sanctity of the family. In effect, however, those dominant values served the interests of the dominant class. They are the vines which make the damaged wall seem worth preserving. This requires a definition of the State broader than its legislative and administrative apparatus which includes institutions in civil society such as the media, the churches, the universities and other disseminators of knowledge, awareness, and "common sense."

Gramsci's concept of hegemony can be valuably applied to the New Deal.<sup>31</sup> Its central premise is that class rule is based on consent rather than on coercion. This is secured through the State's "intellectual and moral leadership" which works to establish a dominant concept of reality - "a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships," as Raymond Williams expresses it.<sup>32</sup> As such, the State is the factor of

<sup>30</sup> For an assessment of the significance of the year, 1968, for cultural studies see Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

<sup>31</sup> The relevance of Gramsci's work for American historians is succinctly advocated and demonstrated in, T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985), 567-93.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Guildford: Croom Helm, 1976), 118.

social cohesion rather than an instrument of class coercion, forging a consensus over attitudes to work, authority and morality, and defining prevailing norms of thought and practice. Necessarily it conceals its relation with the dominant class through illusions of universality. Dominant ideas and practices are registered as natural, inevitable and in the interests of society rather than as expressions of ruling class interests. Hence, in the words of John Hoffman, the State is the "instrument of the particular expressed in the general" or "the servant of the private in the name of the public."<sup>33</sup> The consequence of the State's operation is to provide barriers to challenge and change more pervasive and less accessible than direct political control. As Joseph Femia writes: "Condemned to perceive reality through the conceptual spectacles of the ruling class, [non-dominant groups] are unable to recognize the nature and extent of their own servitude."<sup>34</sup> The role of the media and associated institutions is obviously vital to the establishment and maintenance of hegemony. Questions of cultural representation become more significant than public policy. The tendency is to elevate the commonplace as the major factor in historical causation to the discomfort of both historians of "high places" and scholars of the arts who object to the reduction of culture to the status of historical evidence. The intention, of course, is quite the opposite. History becomes culture.

During the 1930s there was considerable speculation about the nature of culture. Constance Rourke's *The Roots of American Culture*, published in 1937, sought to disassociate culture from notions of talent and worth. In her definition culture constituted the expression of a society and all cultures were relative. For the cultural anthropologist this entailed reconstructing a society's culture in terms of the forms in which it expressed itself and not in relation to some established ideal. The ballet, fine art or symphony had no greater legitimacy than the hoe-down, needlework or folk songs.<sup>35</sup> Rourke's formulation allowed creative expression in America to be valued as a distinctive American phenomenon; a product of American conditions which assumed distinguishable American forms. Paradoxically, this progressive redefinition of culture served as a scholarly articulation of the cultural nationalism

<sup>33</sup> John Hoffman, *The Gramscian Challenge: Coercion and Consent in Marxist Political Theory* (Worcester: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 27.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 31.

<sup>35</sup> Constance Rourke, *The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), esp. 275-96.

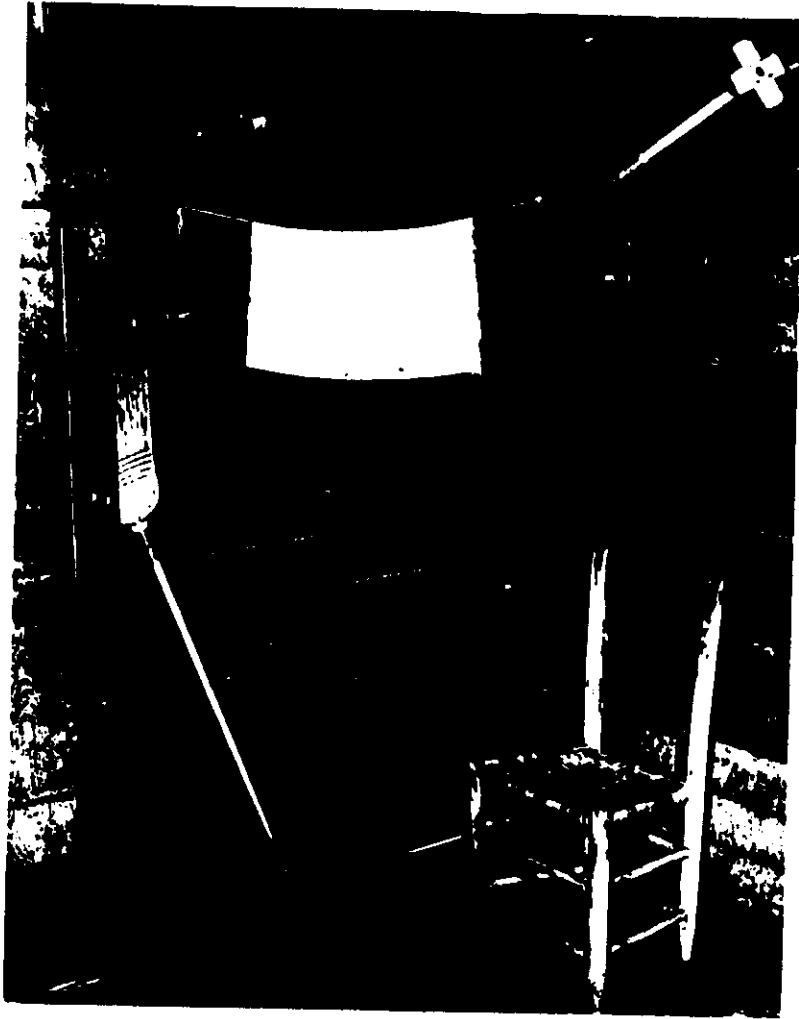


Fig. 1. Walker Evans, *Kitchen Corner*, (Farm Security Administration), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

which buttressed the hegemony of the capitalist class during the crisis of the 1930s.

Charles Alexander notes that an especially prominent strain of cultural nationalism—celebrations of America and its heritage—was a feature of cultural production during the 1930s. It was registered by the creative



Fig. 2. Dorothea Lange, *Sharecropper*, (Farm Security Administration), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

treatment of specifically American subjects and themes, as well as in the search for distinctively American forms of cultural practice.<sup>36</sup> These influences are evident in the paintings of the "regionalists," such as Grant Wood and John Stuart Curry, who depicted American subjects and drew

<sup>36</sup> Charles C. Alexander, *Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 132, 241.



Fig. 3. George Biddle, *Society Freed Through Justice*, (Section of Fine Arts, c. 1933-1936), mural panel number 4, Department of Justice Building, Washington, D.C.

upon nineteenth-century American "naive" formal conventions. Vernacular influences appear in the compositions of Aaron Copland. Ballets such as *Billy the Kid* and the wartime *Rodeo* and *Appalachian Spring*, used white folk music sources to develop an American form of classical expression ("a home-spun musical idiom" to use Copland's own phrase). Similarly,



Fig. 4. Diego M. Rivera, *Detroit Industry*, 1932-33 ( fresco, 1988, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Edsel B. Ford and Gift of Edsel B. Ford.

photographers such as Walker Evans and Paul Strand rejected the modernist experimentalism of Man Ray and the pictorialism of Alfred Stieglitz for subjects and strategies which were identifiably American. Evans's homages to the austerity of American architecture and material culture are simultaneously documents of visual anthropology and exercises in precisionist practice. Mythic notions of the West inform John Steinbeck's treatment of the Joads' journey in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and in John Ford's screen adaptation, the film's specificity to America is continually asserted by the road signs which punctuate the narrative and through the musical score's refrains from the national folk heritage.

This involvement in the exploration and development of American culture should not be regarded solely as a spur to creative activity. It also performed a significant ideological function by providing a "usable" heritage in a period of crisis.<sup>37</sup> Scrutiny of the past not only provided instructive values for the present but imposed a sense of organic unity on American culture. The implication was that the present was merely an interruption in an otherwise coherent pattern of progressive development and that the future would be better because the past was so solid.<sup>38</sup> This moral is pronounced in the Federal Government's mural projects. With their emphases on community building, westward expansion, and the heroic qualities of both early settlers and modern farmers they represented American history as a chronicle of purposeful and constructive progress. According to Park and Markowitz, they suggested that "the virtues that had made the country great in the past could serve as well in the present crisis and even as models for the future."<sup>39</sup>

"Commitment" is a term frequently used to describe cultural production and the role of the intellectual during the 1930s. Crisis and material deprivation provided the context for a reconciliation between the Lost Generation and American society. Commitment was often expressed in a "cult of the people" - the cultural representation of the "common man," evident in the Farm Security Administration photographs, in the social realism of painting and theatre, and in Copland's triumphant *Fanfare* of 1942. According to R. Alan Lawson "the cult of the people" represented the search for a "coherent national character" which

<sup>37</sup> Hence the popularity of historical biographies of America figures during the decade: Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23, 1 (Dec. 1971), 719-24.

<sup>38</sup> "History guarantees hope for the future," Karal Ann Marling, "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," *Prospects* 4 (1979), 436.

<sup>39</sup> Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 29.

transcended divisions of class and region.<sup>40</sup> Warren Susman believed that the abstract concept of "the people" provided "an emotional base for an entire nation." He was careful, however, to distinguish between "the people" and "the workers," for he wrote:

[The People] was a term which cut through divisions of class, ethnicity, and ideological distinctions of Left and Right to form a basic sentiment on which a national culture might be founded... [The] People symbolises a basic unity which makes other distinctions or divisions superficial.<sup>41</sup>

The "documentary movement," identified by William Stott, was the principal vehicle for promoting this concept. The documentary impulse influenced fiction, the founding of popular magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, "newsreels" such as *The March of Time*, photography, and non-fictional literary forms. Stott argues that the "documentary is a radically democratic genre" because it endows non-dominant groups with "a voice" and serves as an instrument of reform.<sup>42</sup> The documentary operates at the levels of the intellect and the emotions by promoting understanding and arousing compassion. Its basic purpose is to mobilize its audience on behalf of progressive reform.

Alternatively, it can be argued that documentary has concealed, or evaded, more than it has exposed, and that its emotional resonances have conflicted with its appeals to reason. Dorothea Lange's photograph for the FSA of an Alabama sharecropper may serve to illustrate these points. At one level the image symbolizes southern poverty through the rheumatic, work-worn hands, the threadbare work clothes, and the outmoded technology. However, the photograph is constructed to suppress our indignation and invite our respect. The subject is dignified and ennobled through the delicacy and poise with which his hands rest on the hoe. This contradiction between the subject's crudeness and the gentleness of his gesture invests the image with a sentimentality that undercuts the photograph's historical relevance. By cropping or decapitating her subject Lange divests him of an identity and a particular socio-economic profile. He ceases to be an oppressed individual or a member of an exploited class and becomes a universal symbol for the dignity of labour. The photograph makes hardship appear respectable and even inevitable.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Lawson, "The Cultural Legacy of the New Deal," in Harvard Sukoff, ed., *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 169.

<sup>41</sup> Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 212.

<sup>42</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 49, 56.

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Produced largely for an affluent audience, the documentary medium occupies a voyeuristic relation to its subjects who tend to be victims who endure their circumstances with dignity and without protest.<sup>43</sup> Susan Sontag's remarks about documentary photography as a "soft murder" may be applicable to the documentary movement in general. "To photograph people," she suggests, "is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed."<sup>44</sup> These insights would apply equally to James Agee's text and to Walker Evans's photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The lower orders are represented as bereft of any meaningful class or ethnic group culture and lacking both the political consciousness and organization to remedy their situation.<sup>45</sup> The moral is that "the lower orders have the problems; the upper classes have the solutions." Since the modern State seeks, in periods of crisis, to incorporate within the dominant culture rather than repress elements threatening to itself, it can be argued that the documentary served the interests of the status quo. The State itself registered and appropriated the issues of poverty and misery to be solved within the acceptable limits of New Deal liberalism. In effect, the documentary distanced as much as it aroused its audience for, as Sontag writes of the consumption of photographic images: "The feeling of being exempt from calamity stimulates interest in looking at painful pictures, and looking at them suggests and strengthens the feeling that one is exempt."<sup>46</sup> We may ask what other forms of cultural practice were available to the generation of the 1930s? In Europe creative radicalism was associated with the avant-garde. After 1924, for example, surrealists challenged audiences' expectations and common sense. Their aim was to challenge the belief that there is a natural order of things through strategies which attempted to disturb, dislocate and refute the notion that things are what they appear. Also, Brecht and Piscator developed alternative, anti-illusionist practices in the theatre; Vertov and Eisenstein

<sup>43</sup> For a critique of the political functions of documentary photography see, Sam Walker, "Documentary Photography in America: The Political Dimensions of an Art Form," *Radical America* 11 (Pt. 1, 1977), 33-66.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1978), 14-15. Note, however, that it is not universally accepted that photography appropriates its subjects differently than other forms of cultural expression. See, for example, Mick Gidley, *American Photography* (South Shields: British Association for American Studies, 1983), 40-41.

<sup>45</sup> The "quietness" of Agee's subjects is emphasized in J. A. Ward, *American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 78-94.

<sup>46</sup> Sontag, 168.

experimented with montage in filmmaking, while John Heartfield developed disruptive collage strategies in still photography.

The 10,000 artists employed by the Federal Government during the 1930s were discouraged from experimenting with the "distorted forms of modernistic art." Edward Bruce, director of the Section of Fine Arts, allowed only one abstract mural to appear in the Section's post office project. Bruce justified his decision on the grounds that "it isn't a bad idea to have one experimental picture in the project, as this abstract stuff is certainly getting a lot of attention these days." He preferred a populist expression which produced "the same feeling I get when I smell a sound, fresh ear of corn." His *alter ego* amongst recognized painters was Thomas Hart Benton who rejected modernism for its "aesthetic obscurity, high falutin' symbolism and devious and indistinct meanings."<sup>47</sup>

The State engaged directly in cultural production during the 1930s through the Works Progress Administration. The arts were organized under the aegis of Federal One and included projects for music, the theatre, writing and the fine arts. Although primarily a relief measure, Jane De Hart Matthews attributes to it a progressive vision. Her characterization of the New Deal's "quest for a cultural democracy" involved three interrelated elements: making the arts more accessible to the public; sponsorship of a new national art, and achieving the social and economic integration of the artist in American society.<sup>48</sup> "Art for the millions" involved a huge enterprise. Researchers compiled the Index of American Design and expanded the Archives of American Folk Song; the Federal Writers' Project produced the American Guide Series which constituted 378 books and pamphlets; the Music Project organized composers' laboratories in 12 cities and also provided musical instruction for 18 million Americans, while the Federal Art Project provided free art classes to some 60,000 people each month. Artists employed by Holger Cahill's Art Project produced 2,500 murals, 18,000 pieces of sculpture and 108,000 canvasses and the Federal Theater Project, headed by Hallie Flanagan, presented 1,200 productions which played to an estimated audience of 25 million.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 57, 66, 106.

<sup>48</sup> Jane De Hart Matthews, "Art and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," *Journal of American History* 62, 2 (Sept. 1975), 316-39.

<sup>49</sup> Ray Allen Billington, "Government and the Arts: The W.P.A. Experience," *American Quarterly* 13, 4 (Winter 1961), 466-79; William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

Such exercises in statistical accounting of the WPA's activities invite respect for its achievements and defy criticism of the Administration's purposes. However, the WPA sought to create a glorious cultural present and the ethos of a notable cultural heritage during the pre-war period when between 14 and 20 per cent of the work force was unemployed. A less generous interpretation of the Administration's function would substitute "bread and circuses" for "cultural democracy." This impression is reinforced by an examination of the cultural output of the various agencies. In a project of such scale it is likely that radical or progressive elements would emerge which would not seek to evade either the socio-economic issues of the era or developments in formal practice. However, the Living Newspaper, influenced by the Epic Theatre of Piscator, and the controversial abstract murals of Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky, or the subversive social realism of August Henkel, received much contemporary attention and promote scholarly interest because they are exceptional. Few American "social realist" painters achieved the formal and thematic disturbances of the Mexican muralists. Although their work caused discomfort to many Americans in the 1930s, it was because of its identification with the causes of the New Deal rather than any signified intention to move beyond them. It should be remembered that 22 million Americans voted for the Republican Party in 1940. Arguably, the work of Reginald Marsh, which alternately evokes lower-class life in terms of lewdness and vitality or spectral marginality, was more subversive than the forlorn, neglected and naturalised figures who inhabit much of the urban landscape of "social realism" during the decade, and are best known, perhaps, through Isaac Soyler's *Employment Agency* (1937). For Roosevelt had identified himself as a champion of this constituency as early as April 1932 in his "Forgotten Man" radio address, and the New Deal registered its interests through programmes on behalf of "the downtrodden."<sup>50</sup> Significantly, the Federal Theatre Project, regarded as the most radical agency within the WPA, was terminated in 1939, four years before the remaining agencies expired.

Gramsci claimed that hegemony was not singular, and we cannot leave the relationships between culture and the State without mention of the failure of the Left to create an alternative hegemony — new ways of viewing the world — during the 1930s. Some scholars attribute this to Stalin's directive of 1935 which ordered western Communist Parties to cooperate with liberal and democratic groups in a popular front against

<sup>50</sup> Cf. David Shapiro, ed., *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), 3–28.

fascism. This involved the CPUSA abandoning the public expression of its revolutionary goals; expressing its support for the New Deal, and proclaiming its "Americanism." It also required that the culture of the Left locate itself within the American heritage and affirm traditional American values such as freedom, democracy and equality. *Native Land* (1942), a product of Frontier Films — a radical filmmakers' cooperative — presented labour's struggle in the context of America's historical commitment to liberty. The framing images of the film, reinforced by Paul Robeson's commentary, are patriotic icons — the coasts trod by the Pilgrim Fathers, the figure of Washington, and in particular, the Statue of Liberty and the American flag.<sup>51</sup> Significant shifts of emphasis can be detected in radical film practice in the United States during the 1930s. Russell Campbell and William Alexander have charted the organizational vagaries of radical filmmaking during the period and have identified the political and formal issues which lay behind them. Nykino, founded in 1934, and its successor, Frontier Films, formed in 1937, abandoned much of the direct political engagement which had been a feature of the early years of the Film and Photo League. Political commitment and personal activism, whether expressed in the organization of boycotts of fascist films, the promotion of Soviet cinema in the United States, or provision of classes in photography and film criticism, were sacrificed for political independence and concentration on professional filmmaking. Equally significant, after 1934 many filmmakers disowned the "politicized" newsreel as an appropriate vehicle for dissident filmmakers, preferring the "dramatic" documentary which would emphasize a film's quality above its overt political commitment. In *Cinema Strikes Back*, Campbell measures the decade's changes in radical film practice against the exhibition of Frontier Films' documentaries in the White House in 1938.<sup>52</sup> By the end of the decade an adversary cinema had become "vitaly American."<sup>53</sup>

Similar developments are apparent in the radical theatre where early experiments with street theatre, which encouraged worker participation, were superseded by the more conventional radical practices of the Group Theatre and the Theatre Union. The influential Group Theatre — a

<sup>51</sup> Production of the film began in 1938.

<sup>52</sup> Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930–1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1911 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>53</sup> From a review of *Native Land in Time*, 8 June 1942. Quoted in Peter C. Rollins, "Ideology and Film Rhetoric: Three Documentaries of the New Deal Era," *Journal of Popular Film* 5, 2 (1976), 139.

"theatre without stars" operated as a collective and sought to develop relationships with its audience through theatrical participation and critical comment. However, its audience was drawn largely from the middle-class, for whom the "cult of the proletariat" provided the same sort of emotional gratification supplied by the "cult of the Negro" during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>54</sup> Where Brecht and Piscator had been concerned to convert theatre into an intellectual experience to foster "practical knowledge," the Group Theatre, predominantly naturalistic in its strategies and committed to developing the Stanislavsky method of performance, produced an "emotional catharsis" for an audience alienated by the Depression. The Group Theatre's most celebrated production, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935),<sup>55</sup> was ostensibly based on the New York taxi drivers' strike of 1934, yet the play works to submerge its economic aspects within the personal dramas and pathos of its central characters. The figures of Harry Fatt, the corrupt union leader, and his gun-toting sidekick, are unexplored caricatures, convenient symbols for the audience to rally against in the collective, cathartic call to strike which ends the play.<sup>56</sup>

## IV

The compromises, sentimentality and nationalism of the culture of the Left during the Popular Front era sapped its creativity and effectiveness. Richard Pells, in his path-breaking study, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, believes that the insistence on the intellectual being "responsible" dampened his creative and critical energy.<sup>57</sup> The result, as Warren Susman noted, was that the Left failed to provide any appropriate and distinctive myths and symbols to represent the possibility of an alternative society and the prospect of a different future.<sup>58</sup> In a period of conciliation the Left's causes were those of the New Deal and, as Norman Thomas complained at the time, the New Deal had appropriated the causes of the

Left. Not only did the New Deal realize many of the pledges of the Socialist Party platform of 1932, it also commandeered the symbols of the "common man" less than a decade after the death of Eugene Debs, who had epitomized the stereotype in national politics. Surely the failure of American socialism in the 1930s cannot be solely attributed to the successes of the New Deal, when even its most fervent advocates recognize the New Deal's limitations in political economy and social reform?

The adoption by the New Deal of such equalitarian symbolism and its recasting of American history and culture in a democratic mould represent only a part of the cultural milieu which defied radical change during the 1930s. For all its legislative activity and administrative innovation, the New Deal was not effective only at the level of public policy. It is not enough to recite the roll of alphabetical agencies since the accomplishments of many of them were deprecated as much by contemporaries as they have been criticized by historians subsequently. By examining the culture of the period historians might gain a greater and more complex understanding of the reasons why Americans were prepared to accept and, indeed, celebrate the limited benefits they derived from the New Deal. Ultimately, perhaps, the New Deal's words and those offered on its behalf spoke louder than its actions, and during the 1930s cultural representation and consciousness were as significant as institutions and eminent individuals in promoting change and defining its terms.

<sup>54</sup> An aspect which stimulated practitioners of social realism as well as audiences. See David P. Peeler, *Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

<sup>55</sup> First performed under the New Theatre Leagues' sponsorship.

<sup>56</sup> Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and the Theater of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford, 1974), 51-55; 300-37; C. W. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: 1, 1900-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 200-2.

<sup>57</sup> Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 298; 318.

<sup>58</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 178-79.