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Waiting for Lefty

"In any view of the American cultural situation, the importance of the radical movement of the Thirties cannot be overestimated. It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we now know it in its great size and influence." Lionel Trilling's retrospective observation remains a starting point for understanding the importance of the cultural front. For the age of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) marked the first time in the history of the United States that the left—the tradition of radical democratic movements for social transformation—had a central, indeed shaping, impact on American culture. Whether we think of culture as the norms, values, beliefs, and ways of life of particular groups of people, or, in a more limited sense, as the texts, artifacts, and performances produced by a variety of artists, entertainers, and cultural craftworkers, the left had had little influence on the cultures of the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were of course particular immigrant and ethnic communities in which the left—whether socialist, anarchist, or communist—was influential in shaping daily life and popular entertainments; and certain radicalisms—feminism, abolition, and populism—had mobilized large numbers of Americans, creating alternative movement cultures of solidarity. But the world of culture in the more limited sense—that part of the social surplus devoted to the arts and entertainment—had few ties to the left. There were exceptions—one thinks of the labor radicalism of the dime novelist George Lippard, of Margaret Fuller's feminism, or of William Dean Howells's defense of the Haymarket anarchists—but their iconoclasm and idiosyncrasy stands out.¹

The "little renaissance" of the 1910s signaled a more sustained connection between the arts communities and the left, between the bohemia of Greenwich Village and the movement cultures of the Debsian Socialist Party and the Wobblies. Indeed, the legendary Paterson Pageant of June

1913, which brought together striking silkworkers of Paterson, New Jersey, and Greenwich Village writers and artists at Madison Square Garden, inaugurated a new relation between the left and the producers of culture; it was the first great "benefit concert." Nevertheless, the radical culture of the 1910s, of Greenwich Village and Provincetown, was only a harbinger of the left culture of the depression. For by the late 1930s, a remarkable range of writers, intellectuals, and artists had some connection to the left and its cultural initiatives.

The usual account of this turn to the left in the 1930s gestures to the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, to the sight of breadlines and the fear of jackboots; the radicalism of the artists, we are told, was a response to a particular moment, and it evaporated with the defeat of fascism and the return of prosperity. Though the depression and the rise of fascism were surely triggers for many individuals, the emergence of a left culture in the age of the CIO was the result of two larger transformations in American life: the appearance of a powerful mass social movement, the Popular Front, based on the unprecedented organization of industrial workers into the new unions of the CIO; and the remarkable development of the modern "cultural apparatus," to adopt a phrase of C. Wright Mills, consisting of the culture industries of mass entertainment and the state cultural institutions. Thus, this chapter has three parts: a sketch of the lineaments of the Popular Front social movement, an outline of its history, and an account of the emergence of the cultural apparatus.

1. The Popular Front as a Social Movement

The Popular Front was the insurgent social movement forged from the labor militancy of the fledgling CIO, the anti-fascist solidarity with Spain, Ethiopia, China, and the refugees from Hitler, and the political struggles on the left wing of the New Deal. Born out of the social upheavals of 1934 and coinciding with the Communist Party's period of greatest influence in US society, the Popular Front became a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching. Along with the Socialist, feminist, and syndicalist insurgencies of the early 1910s (represented by Eugene Debs's Socialist Party, the women's suffrage movement, the IWW, and the *Masses* magazine), and the New Left, black liberation, and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the moment of the Popular Front stands as a central instance of radical insurgency in modern US history. Indeed, Popular Front attitudes so impressed themselves on the American people that a 1942 *Fortune* poll found that 25 percent of Americans favored socialism and another 35 percent had an open mind about it.²

As a result, the politics of the Popular Front haunts all the periodic debates over the meaning and legacy of the 1930s. Unfortunately, the legacy of the anti-Communist crusade of the late 1940s and 1950s has placed the Communist issue at the heart of virtually all considerations of the Popular Front. Whether the subject is the American Writers' Congress or the United Automobile Workers, the first question about the protagonists remains that of the House Committee on Un-American Activities: Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party? As a result, the politics of the period have a spurious simplicity: Was she or wasn't she? The Popular Front, we are told, was made up of Communists and fellow-traveling liberals; the center was red, the periphery, shades of pink. This model not only informs the anti-Communist historiography, but also the liberal defenses of non-Communist fellow travelers and the recent revisionist histories of the Communist Party. "A fixation on the Party, in both memoirs of members and ex-members and in the work of historians, has left enormous gaps in our knowledge of the radical past," David Roediger has recently noted.

Moreover, the assumption of too many Communists, ex-Communists, and historians is that those labeled "fellow travelers" were superficial, easily misled, and reactive in their politics and were seekers of vicarious pleasure through identification with the Russian Revolution. . . . Oddly, a historical literature bitterly denouncing fellow travelers coexists with a growing body of scholarship sympathetic to longtime Party leaders. Perhaps one way to move the history of communism beyond the rather arid current debates within the field would be to focus on the tens of thousands of fellow travelers, rank-and-file workers in Communist-led unions, and persons who left the Party without great hostility. This periphery, far larger than the Party, voted with its feet by supporting some Party activities in some periods and refusing to support other causes at other times.³

Indeed, any examination of the Popular Front, particularly its cultural front, supports Roediger's suggestion: the rank and file of the Popular Front were the fellow travelers, the large periphery. But even this terminology is misleading; the periphery was in many cases the center, the "fellow travelers" *were* the Popular Front. It is mistaken to see the Popular Front as a marriage of Communists and liberals. The heart of the Popular Front as a social movement lay among those who were non-Communist socialists and independent leftists, working with Communists and with liberals, but marking out a culture that was neither a Party nor a liberal New Deal culture. Many of the key figures of the cultural front—Orson Welles, F.O. Matthiessen, Elizabeth Hawes, Carey McWilliams, Louis Adamic, John Hammond, and Kenneth Burke—were independent leftists who worked with Party members like Marc Blitzstein, Tillie Olsen, John Howard

Lawson, Granville Hicks, and Richard Wright. Any history of the Popular Front must give the Communist Party its due—it was without doubt the most influential left organization in the period and its members were central activists in a range of formations and institutions—while recognizing that the Popular Front was more a historical bloc, in Gramsci's sense, than a party, a broad and tenuous left-wing alliance of fractions of the subaltern classes.

What would it mean to think of the Popular Front social movement as a historical bloc? Like many useful theoretical terms, Gramsci's notion of an historical bloc has two senses: it connotes both an alliance of social forces and a specific social formation. The connection between the two lies in the concept of hegemony: a moment of hegemony is when a historical bloc (in the sense of a particular alliance of class fractions and social forces) is able to lead a society for a period of time, winning consent through a form of representation, and thereby establishing a historical bloc (in the sense of a social formation). In such moments, one often finds the historical period taking its name from the social alliance. The New Deal was such a historical bloc, at once a particular alliance of political actors and the ruling force in the society.⁴

In analyzing a historical bloc, Gramsci turns to the dialectic of base and superstructure, seeing social movements and alliances as microcosms of the social order as a whole. This offers a more powerful model for analyzing the Popular Front than the center-periphery model that has dominated most histories. For though the social alliance represented by the Popular Front historical bloc never achieved national power or hegemony, remaining an unruly part of Roosevelt's New Deal alliance, its economic, political, and cultural authority among the ethnic working classes of the great metropolises and industrial towns of North America was far reaching. To understand the Popular Front we must look at its material base as well as its political and cultural superstructures, its social content as well as its ideological forms.⁵

The base of the Popular Front was the labor movement, the organization of millions of industrial workers into the new unions of the CIO. For this was the age of the CIO, the years that saw what one historian has called "the largest sustained surge of worker organization in American history." Technically, the CIO began as a dissident group of industrial unionists within the American Federation of Labor in the fall of 1935; the largest participating unions were the mineworkers led by John L. Lewis and the two major needle trades unions (the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) led by Sidney Hillman and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) led by David Dubinsky). But this initiative itself was a response to the tremendous surge of worker organization that had followed the 16 June 1933 signing of the National Industrial

Recovery Act, which led to the general strikes of 1934. Workers flocked into the federal unions of the AFL and the Communist-led unions of the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). In some industries, the fledgling CIO issued charters to these emerging rank-and-file unions; in other industries, they sent in organizing committees to form unions. After the remarkable success of the sit-down strikes of the Akron rubberworkers (in February and March 1936) and the Flint autoworkers (between December 1936 and February 1937), the CIO became a federation of industrial unions, backed largely by the power of John L. Lewis's United Mine Workers. By the early 1940s, the CIO was dominated by new unions in the metalworking industries—the United Auto Workers, the United Steel Workers, and the United Electrical Workers—and "industrial unionism" was not simply a kind of unionism but a vision of social reconstruction.⁶

As a result, the CIO stands for more than the labor federation itself; as Len De Caux later wrote, "unorganized workers of all kinds tried to get into the nearest CIO union, regardless of name or industry. They just wanted to 'join the CIO.' It was a mass movement with a message, revivalistic in fervor, militant in mood, joined together by class solidarity." The CIO marks the emergence of a new working class, what I will call the CIO working class. This new working class had been created by the migration of millions of people from an agricultural periphery that included Quebec, Scandinavia, European Russia, Hungary, Croatia-Slovenia, Greece, Italy, Sicily, the defeated Confederate States of America, central and northern Mexico, and parts of Japan and China to an industrial core in the Northeast and Middle West of the United States. This "proletarian globe-hopping" had created the multi-racial, multi-ethnic metropolises of modernism. By 1930, two-thirds of the people in the great cities of the United States were foreign-born or the children of the foreign-born; and the "black metropolises" within those cities had formed as many black Americans migrated from the segregated, sharecropping South to the northern cities of industry.⁷

The children of these proletarian migrants, the second-generation ethnic workers, were the rank and file of the new CIO unions. And they were also the creators of a new militant working-class culture that was no longer marginalized in the "foreign" ghettos. The famous Section 7-A of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 had established "the right of labor to representatives of its own choosing"; in its wake, workers found economic representatives in the mass CIO unions and political representatives in Roosevelt's New Deal Democratic Party, Earl Browder's Communist Party, and the state labor parties. But these second-generation workers who created the CIO also found cultural representatives, as a host of organic intellectuals ranging from actors to novelists, popular singers to Marxist theorists, began to reshape American culture. Moreover, this new

working-class culture was, as I shall argue, the foundation of the cultural front, nurturing many of its plebeian writers and artists, and becoming subject and audience of many of its works.⁸

But if the young second-generation workers coming of age during the depression were in many ways responsible for the workplace and neighborhood militance that formed the new industrial unions, they were in turn reshaped by the CIO's movement culture and by the Popular Front. In grasping this dialectic, a number of recent labor historians have been able to escape the old arguments about whether the CIO was "radical" or "conservative," whether a militant rank and file was restrained or betrayed by its conservative leaders, or whether the CIO radicalism was simply a few militants trying to rouse essentially conservative working-class masses. For if the pioneers of industrial unionism were often skilled workers with radical politics—"sparkplug unionists"—the success of the unions depended on their alliance with the second-generation ethnic machine tenders. "Virtually every industrial union that arose in the United States in the 1930s," labor historian Gary Gerstle has written, "depended on the same alliance of radical and ethnic workers that propelled the ITU [Independent Textile Union] into being." This alliance was built on a wide-ranging shift in workers' orientations in the 1920s and 1930s, a transformation in what Elizabeth Cohen calls "patterns of loyalty and . . . allegiance" to ethnic organizations, welfare agencies, stores, theaters, political parties, and unions.⁹

It is clear that the stark opposition of revolutionary socialism and middle-class liberalism or consumerism does not adequately grasp the subtleties of this new working-class culture, these new patterns of loyalty and allegiance, these new ideologies. To say that most workers were not communists surely does not mean that their values and beliefs were shaped by the languages and symbols of liberalism or mass consumerism. Rather, the culture of the CIO working class was marked by a sustained sense of class consciousness and a new rhetoric of class, by a new moral economy, and by the emergence of a working-class ethnic Americanism.¹⁰

As Vanneman and Cannon's persuasive study of class perception and identification shows, the depression generation—the cohort born between 1904 and 1923—was "the most working-class cohort in American history": it had the highest number of people identifying themselves as working class. This was not the result of shifts in the social structure; rather, they conclude that "it is the trauma of the Depression that solidifies working-class perceptions and changes the way Americans think about class." Moreover, as a number of historians have demonstrated, this was embodied in a new iconography and rhetoric of class.¹¹

This pronounced class awareness or consciousness framed many of the working-class ideologies that developed in the age of the CIO. "Most

working- and middle-class Americans in the Depression were not socialists in any strict ideological sense," Robert McElvaine concludes from a study of public opinion polls, "but they were certainly leaning to the left." Though these working-class ideologies often took incompatible forms, all projected a "moral economy" that would temper the ravages of capitalism: the Catholic corporatism with its organic conception of the body politic that deeply influenced CIO leaders like Philip Murray; the anti-Semitic Catholic fascism of Father Coughlin; the revolutionary syndicalism whose roots lay in the Wobblies; the American versions of social democracy developed around a notion of "industrial democracy"; and the socialist and communist visions of social transformation, of a cooperative commonwealth or a Soviet America.¹²

Along with these moral economies, there emerged a paradoxical synthesis of competing nationalisms—pride in ethnic heritage and identity combined with an assertive Americanism—that might be called "ethnic Americanism." This dominates much of the culture of the second-generation ethnic workers, who Louis Adamic called the "new Americans." This combination created a potent ideological constellation, sustaining both the radical "cultural pluralism" of the left-wing Popular Front and the white ethnic nationalism that characterized the anti-communist anti-capitalism of the CIO's right wing.¹³

It was this new working-class culture of the second-generation machine tenders that sustained the CIO and provided the base for the Popular Front social movement. For the Popular Front became the attempt to unite these millions of industrial workers with the "middle classes"—white-collar workers, professionals, and shopkeepers—in powerful urban alliances, building what one historian has called "an all-embracing Popular Front civic culture." Under the sign of the "people," this Popular Front public culture sought to forge ethnic and racial alliances, mediating between Anglo American culture, the culture of the ethnic workers, and African American culture, in part by reclaiming the figure of "America" itself, imagining an Americanism that would provide a usable past for ethnic workers, who were thought of as foreigners, in terms of a series of ethnic slurs. Its anthem, as we shall see later, was Paul Robeson's version of Earl Robinson's cantata, "Ballad for Americans," with its invocation of "everybody who's nobody . . . an Irish, Negro, Jewish, Italian, French and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Scotch, Hungarian, Litvak, Swedish, Finnish, Canadian, Greek and Turk, and Czech and double Czech American."¹⁴

This Popular Front public culture took three political forms: a social democratic electoral politics; a politics of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist solidarity; and a civil liberties campaign against lynching and labor repression. The first of these, the electoral politics of the Popular Front,

included both halves of the continuing antinomy in left electoral strategies in the US: the hope and desire for a genuine "third party," a farmer-labor party (a hope that contributed to the 1948 Progressive Party campaign of Henry Wallace); and the vision of a "realignment" whereby the New Deal Democratic Party created by Roosevelt might contain within it the seeds of a social democratic labor party—the dream of the 1944 CIO-PAC (Political Action Committee) campaign.¹⁵

Neither of these fully succeeded. On the one hand, in some places, the Popular Front social movement did become the basis for state and local political formations like New York's American Labor Party, Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party, Wisconsin's Progressive Party, Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign, and Washington's Commonwealth Federation (which the journalist John Gunther characterized as "the first effective popular front in America"). At the local level, political figures like New York's Vito Marcantonio and Benjamin Davis, Jr, Washington's Hugh DeLacy, and Minnesota's Floyd Olson became tribunes of the Popular Front. However, at the national level, the Popular Front had no independent political vehicle. Not only did the giant figure of Franklin Roosevelt dominate the Popular Front imagination, but the only national *political* figure who represented the Popular Front was a New Deal Democrat, Henry Wallace: Wallace's "Century of the Common Man" speech was the Popular Front response to Henry Luce's "The American Century," and he became the movement's standard-bearer in the disastrous 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign. But neither Wallace nor Earl Browder, the Popular Front leader of the Communist Party, ever achieved the symbolic stature of Eugene Debs or Jesse Jackson, two other presidential standard-bearers of the twentieth-century left. And in many places, the Popular Front supported New Deal Democratic governors, California's Culbert Olsen, Pennsylvania's George Earle, and Michigan's Frank Murphy, for example. Thus, in some ways, the US Popular Front was *not* a Popular Front at all; unlike the Front Populaire in France, in which the union of Socialists and Communists was a single, if short-lived, political force, the Popular Front in the US was largely an alliance of the social movement with Roosevelt's Democratic Party.¹⁶

Thus, many historians have seen the Popular Front as nothing more than New Deal liberalism, with the Communist Party a "fellow traveler" of the New Deal. However, this is misleading; as Ira Katznelson has persuasively argued, the alliance of the Popular Front social movement with the New Deal Democratic Party became the American equivalent of European social democracy. "That labor had the ability to lead a social democratic breakthrough in American politics that could build on the achievements of the New Deal and radicalize them was a commonplace of the early 1940s," Katznelson argues, "one that appeared to be affirmed during

World War II by such achievements as the organization by the CIO of Ford and Bethlehem Steel, the growth in the size of organized labor, the incorporation within labor's embrace of the previously unorganized female and black members of the labor force, and an extraordinary wave of strikes in the aftermath of the war." One can see the outlines of this social democratic politics in the organization of the CIO Political Action Committee in 1943 and its comprehensive "People's Program for 1944." If the Popular Front was not a revolutionary movement, neither was it merely an extension of US liberalism. Rather, the earlier collapse of the Debsian Socialist Party meant that US social democracy was the product not of a Second International labor or Socialist party but of the alliance of the New Deal and the Communist Party. As a result, the defeat of the Popular Front social movement in the Cold War years meant the defeat of a US social democracy.¹⁷

The second form of Popular Front public culture was the politics of international solidarity. Much of the energy of the Popular Front social movement—the "premature anti-fascists" as the witchhunters would later call them—went into the struggle to mobilize Americans to stand with the Spanish Republic besieged by the fascist Franco, to support Ethiopia invaded by Mussolini, to defend China against imperial Japan, and to aid the victims of and refugees from Hitler's Third Reich. Though none of these campaigns changed state policy, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 inaugurated an official anti-fascist alliance between the US and the USSR, and the anti-fascist politics of the Popular Front merged with the politics of war mobilization, the struggles to define the aims and objectives of the war. Moreover, the politics of anti-fascism incorporated many refugee writers and artists into the Popular Front social movement in the US, making it as internationalist a culture as any to have appeared in US history. Both before and during the war, the Popular Front against fascism became a broad and deep political and cultural movement among Americans; it not only contributed to the defeat of fascism in the 1940s, it created an anti-fascist common sense in American culture.¹⁸

But the politics of international solidarity also meant solidarity with the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union. This has led many historians to see the Popular Front, not as a social movement, but simply as a strategy of the Communist Party, a political line dictated by the Moscow-controlled Communist International to the various national Communist Parties to accommodate the foreign policy of Stalin's USSR. In the face of Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Communists around the world tempered their anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles against the capitalist democracies and their sectarian attacks on Socialist, social democratic, and liberal organizations (though not their attacks on anti-Stalinist parties and

individuals associated with Trotsky) in order to forge a united front against fascism domestically and internationally. The revelations of the Moscow purge trials and the Communist attacks on anarchists, socialists, and syndicalists in Spain fractured the alliances between left anti-fascists; Popular Front anti-fascism had a near fatal shock when the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis on 23 August 1939, and Communist Parties around the world supported the Soviets' "neutrality." This ended when the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany in June 1941, and the wartime alliance between the US and the USSR redefined international solidarity, as the Communist Party subordinated everything to the war effort. However, this wartime front collapsed in 1945 with the onset of the Cold War, with its proxy wars and battles in Eastern and Southern Europe and in the decolonizing Third World.

In this view, the central issue of the Popular Front remains Stalinism, and the litmus test for US intellectual and cultural figures is their attitude towards and statements about the USSR. For historians like William O'Neill, the cultural significance of Paul Robeson is summed up in his "Stalinism" and that of Dwight Macdonald in his "anti-Stalinism." Indeed, the "lessons" of the dangers of fellow traveling remained a leitmotif in the attacks on left-wing solidarity movements from the 1960s to the 1980s. However, this narrative only illustrates the well-known contradictions of any politics of international solidarity: on the one hand, it is built on powerful ways of imagining the globe, narratives of the world system that make sense of an incomprehensible totality; and, on the other hand, it is subject to the twists and turns of international diplomacy and to the internal crises of foreign movements, parties, and regimes. To focus on the zigzags of international diplomacy is to misunderstand the larger significance of Popular Front solidarity.

For the culture of the Popular Front transformed the ways people imagined the globe. It did this in its daily work of helping refugees, organizing tours, and holding benefit performances and dances for Spanish and Russian war relief. But it also did this through the international stories dramatized in the works of the cultural front. The campaigns of solidarity for Ethiopia and the Spanish Republic depended on a larger narrative of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism that can be glimpsed in the retellings of the Haitian revolution (ranging from C.L.R. James's history *The Black Jacobins* and the novels of Arna Bontemps and Guy Endore, to Jacob Lawrence's *Toussaint L'Ouverture* paintings and the Federal Theater productions of *Black Empire*, *Haiti*, and the "voodoo" *Macbeth*), in the allegories of fascist invasion (from MacLeish's *Fall of the City* and Langston Hughes's *Air Raid* to Picasso's *Guernica*), and in the anti-fascist espionage thrillers. And the romance of revolution was manifested not only in the popularity of the Soviet films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin,

but also in the romance of the Mexican revolution, embodied in the grand murals of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, the novels of B. Traven, and the films *Juarez* and *Viva Zapata*. The success of the Popular Front politics of international solidarity lay in the ability of these narratives to displace the imperial fantasies of race war that dominated American popular culture.¹⁹

Perhaps the most effective part of Popular Front public culture was its third form, the mobilization around civil liberties and the struggle against lynching and labor repression. The "mass" or "labor" defense developed by the International Labor Defense (ILD) combined legal action with a mass protest campaign, building popular support for jailed unionists, political prisoners, immigrant radicals facing deportation, and black defendants facing racist trials. Founded in 1925, the ILD can be seen as the earliest Popular Front organization, and, as we will see, its campaign to free Sacco and Vanzetti was the first act of the new left of the depression. The ILD's photomontage, *Labor Defender*, was probably the most important left-wing magazine of the late 1920s and early 1930s. For it was the *Labor Defender's* photomontages, reportage, and testimonies that turned the obscure local strikes and trials of Gastonia, Harlan, and Scottsboro into national conflicts: Theodore Dreiser wrote articles for it on Scottsboro and Harlan and John Dos Passos wrote about Gastonia and Scottsboro. The ILD took the lead in the defense of the Scottsboro Nine (arrested and sentenced to death on rape charges in 1931) and it helped organize the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, which sent a delegation of writers and intellectuals led by Dreiser to Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1931 and 1932, publicizing the repression of union activists. The politics of labor defense, creating national movements in support of celebrated political defendants and prisoners, remained at the heart of the Popular Front social movement for three decades, extending to the defense of the young Chicano defendants in the 1943 Sleepy Lagoon case and eventually to the support of defendants in Cold War trials, deportations, and congressional hearings.

The other side of the labor defense was the legislative campaigns against labor repression and lynching. The hearings before the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee between 1936 and 1940 brought national attention to the use of spies, munitions, strikebreakers, and private police forces against workers organizing unions; though the La Follette Committee failed to enact legislation against repressive labor practices, its hearings became part of the common sense of the Popular Front social movement, retold in popular books like Leo Huberman's *The Labor Spy Racket* and dramatized in films like *Native Land*. Similarly, though the campaign to enact federal anti-lynching legislation never succeeded, it remained a central part of

Popular Front culture, figured in Billie Holiday's classic performance of "Strange Fruit."²⁰

All three of these forms of Popular Front public culture—the social democratic electoral politics, the politics of international solidarity, and the campaigns against lynching and labor repression—were national in ambition, attempting to organize and re-imagine what Gramsci called the national-popular, the American people. However, as with many American social movements, the strength of the Popular Front was regional and local, rooted in particular cities and industrial towns. These urban Popular Fronts were the products of distinct political histories, and had a variety of class, ethnic, and racial complexions. A key institution of the urban Popular Front was the CIO's Industrial Union Council (IUC), which brought together representatives of CIO unions in a particular city or region. The IUCs coordinated strikes and organizing campaigns, took part in political campaigns, and were a forum for statements on civil rights and social justice. Thus, much of the movement's national visibility derived from the influence of the urban Popular Fronts of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles on the culture industries located in those cities.²¹

In New York, there were three bases of the Popular Front: the garment and needle trades, the white-collar unions, and the Harlem community organizations. Predominantly Jewish and Italian women, the needle trades workers not only made up a large part of New York's ethnic working class, but were well-organized and militant. Sidney Hillman's Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) and David Dubinsky's International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) were, along with the United Mine Workers, the original backbone of the CIO, and were committed to organizing textile workers across the nation and extending labor's political and cultural power. The needle trades unions helped organize and fund the political manifestation of New York's Popular Front, the American Labor Party, an attempt to build a labor party without abandoning political figures from the major parties who supported labor: as a result, the ALP was able to cross-endorse Democrats like Franklin Roosevelt and Republicans like Fiorello La Guardia and Vito Marcantonio, as well as electing city council members of their own, including Mike Quill, the leader of the largely Irish American Transport Workers Union. An alliance of the needle trades unions founded the Labor Stage, which eventually became the ILGWU's theater: their production of the show *Pins and Needles*, as I will show later, was one of the great accomplishments of the cultural front.²²

The growing white-collar unions made up the second wing of New York's Popular Front. Perhaps the most visible was the Newspaper Guild, organized in 1933 and led by the radical journalist Heywood Broun. Broun was one of New York's most famous and most controversial columnists: he had been fired by the *New York World* in 1927 for his columns protesting the

execution of Sacco and Vanzetti and had run unsuccessfully for Congress as a Socialist in 1930 before putting his energies into the organization of the Guild. Throughout the 1930s, his widely read column in the *New York World-Telegram*, "It Seems to Me," was a mainstay of the Popular Front. The less visible white-collar unions—the American Communications Association, the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA), and the teachers union (Local 555, affiliated with the United Public Workers)—provided many of the activists of the Popular Front. "Many of the women who were active in the UOPWA," one historian writes, "came from working class families where reading and intellectual improvement were a part of growing up. . . . [They] had put themselves through city colleges or night school to become teachers, librarians, economists and social workers, but could find nothing other than office work." Those who found work as teachers and social workers were the rank and file of the teachers union and the UOPWA's social service locals.²³

The Harlem left was the third wing of New York's Popular Front, and New York was the site of some of the most visible alliances across racial lines of the period. The Harlem left had two sources: the long struggle to organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, beginning in 1925, and the campaign to free the Scottsboro Nine in the years following their conviction in 1931. The sleeping car porters were led by A. Philip Randolph, who had been part of the group of radical intellectuals who had founded the *Messenger* in 1917; the Scottsboro campaign was led by two black Communist lawyers, William Patterson and Benjamin Davis. In 1936, the Harlem Popular Front took institutional form in the National Negro Congress, a coalition of 585 organizations with a membership of 1.2 million, which depended on a prickly and often fragile alliance between Randolph's Brotherhood, the largest black union in the country, Adam Clayton Powell's Abyssinian Baptist Church (Powell was elected to the city council in 1941 on the American Labor Party ticket, and to Congress in 1944), and the Harlem Communist Party, whose standard-bearer, Benjamin Davis, was elected to Powell's city council seat in 1943. Political organizing by Randolph, Powell, and Davis sustained the Harlem social movement through periodic crises, and the left-wing Harlem newspaper, the *People's Voice*, served as its principal organ. The Harlem Popular Front also had deep roots in African American cultural circles: the prominence of Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and the young Richard Wright, combined with the cultural organizing of Louise Thompson, brought many performers and artists into the Harlem movement.²⁴

Because of the concentration of cultural institutions in New York, the city's Popular Front always had a strong cultural superstructure. The left had a substantial presence in New York's theaters, including Broadway, the alternative theater, and the units of the Federal Theatre Project. The City

University, the "working-class Harvard," was the center of the student left; its "alcoves" are often recalled as the battlegrounds where the myriad tendencies of the Marxist left competed. The proletarian avant-garde was represented in New York's "coffee-pots" and small galleries, and in the networks made up of the John Reed Club, the Composers Collective, the Film and Photo League, and the Artists Union. The grand conventions of the cultural front took place largely in New York: the biannual American Writers' Congresses, the American Artists' Congress, the famous Spirituals to Swing concerts of 1938 and 1939. There were also several attempts to create a Popular Front photomagazine: the short-lived *Ken* and *Friday* were both attempts to create weeklies on the model of *Life*, and *TAC* and *Direction* were glossy monthly magazines of arts and culture. Perhaps the most successful organ of the New York Popular Front was *PM*, the afternoon tabloid newspaper that appeared throughout the 1940s, featuring extensive labor reporting, the "News for Living" section of Elizabeth Hawes, and Weegee's photographs of the "naked city."²⁵

The New York Popular Front was always deeply divided between Communists and non-Communist leftists. New York was the center of Communist Party strength: half of the Party's total national membership was in New York, and, under the editorship of Clarence Hathaway, the *Daily Worker* had been transformed from a simple Party organ into a semblance of a metropolitan newspaper with columnists, comic strips, and Lester Rodney's sportswriting. Communists led a number of unions, and Party activists could be found throughout the labor movement, the American Labor Party, and the cultural organizations. But the old social democratic left remained powerful in the garment unions, and the newer formations of dissident communists including the Trotskyists and Lovestoneites had significant influence. The ACWA's Sidney Hillman, like John L. Lewis, was willing to work with the Communist left, but Dubinsky's ILGWU, influenced by the expelled Communist leader Jay Lovestone, grew increasingly hostile to the Communists. In 1938, the ILGWU left the CIO and returned to the AFL, and in 1944 Dubinsky left the American Labor Party to form New York's Liberal Party. Similarly, the divisions between the NAACP and the Communist Party, which had grown out of their conflict over the handling of the Scottsboro case, were never settled. Harlem's leading labor leader, A. Philip Randolph, was deeply suspicious of the Communist Party, having been periodically attacked by them. As a result, the history of the New York Popular Front is a zigzag of temporary alliances and broken coalitions, of denunciations and reconciliations, splits and mergers.²⁶

The California Popular Front was less divided. Its base was the longshoremen's union, led by Harry Bridges, that had grown out of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike. "We take the stand that we as workers have nothing in common with the employers," Bridges told a University of

Washington student. "We are in a class struggle, and we subscribe to the belief that if the employer is not in business his products will still be necessary and we still will be providing them when there is no employing class. We frankly believe that day is coming."²⁷

After taking the Pacific Coast District of the AFL's International Longshoremen's Association into the CIO in August 1937 (becoming the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union [ILWU]), Bridges became the CIO's West Coast regional director, and the longshoremen's union became the base for a "march inland," organizing warehousing, packing-shed, food-processing, and agricultural workers. Linking up with the Communist-led union of agricultural and cannery workers, and the new West Coast locals of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) (led in part by the Communist unionist Wyndham Mortimer), Bridges's West Coast CIO served as the heart of the California Popular Front; indeed, as the US government embarked on a long attempt to deport Bridges, an Australian, he became a folk hero, an emblem of the militant and incorruptible labor leader. Woody Guthrie wrote two ballads of Harry Bridges, and the leaders of the Citizen's Committee for Harry Bridges are a microcosm of the cultural front: the Harvard literary critic F.O. Matthiessen, the jazz critic and producer John Hammond, and the theater and film director Orson Welles.²⁸

The "march inland" forged an alliance between the longshoremen and the Mexican American and Asian American workers in the fields and canneries of California's agricultural factories. The formation of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) in 1937 was the result of a decade of agricultural strikes and organizing, which I discuss in chapter 7. Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese workers traveled throughout the West and Northwest working the fields, fisheries, and canneries; and the independent unions organized by figures like Chris Mensalvas, Carlos Bulosan, and Karl Yoneda joined UCAPAWA in San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland. In Southern California, UCAPAWA began organizing the workers in California's canneries and food-processing plants, three-quarters of whom were women, under the leadership of the Guatemalan immigrant Luisa Moreno. Moreno, who became the state CIO vice president, was also a moving force behind El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española (the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples), the main vehicle of the Mexican American Popular Front. El Congreso brought together figures like Josefina Fierro de Bright, a young Mexican activist who had worked in support of the farmworkers, and Bert Corona, the president of Los Angeles's Local 26 of the ILWU. Though El Congreso was short lived, it was, as one historian concludes, "a crucial training ground for a generation of Mexican American and immigrant political and social activists."²⁹

The political roots of the California Popular Front lay in Upton Sinclair's historic, if unsuccessful, 1934 EPIC (End Poverty in California) campaign for governor; the legacy of the EPIC campaign was the Democratic Federation for Political Unity which was formed to support the successful gubernatorial campaign of Culbert Olsen, a left-wing New Dealer. In an important symbolic gesture, Olsen freed labor radicals Tom Mooney and Warren Billings, who had been framed for a 1916 San Francisco bombing, after more than twenty years in prison. The years of the Olsen administration, 1938–42, were in many ways the high point of the California Popular Front. The voices of the West Coast Popular Front were the *Pacific Weekly*, a lively magazine edited by Ella Winter and Lincoln Steffens out of Carmel in the mid 1930s, and the *People's World*, the Communist newspaper edited by Al Richmond, which featured popular vernacular columns of humor and politics by Woody Guthrie and Mike Quin.³⁰

The August 1942 arrest and subsequent conviction for murder of seventeen young Chicanos galvanized the California Popular Front: Sleepy Lagoon became the West Coast equivalent of Scottsboro. Josefina Fierro de Bright organized the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, which united the activists of El Congreso with Popular Front figures like writer and lawyer Carey McWilliams. By 1944, the convictions had been reversed, but the two years of the defense campaign coincided with a moral panic about "Mexican crime" that swept Southern California, culminating in the "zoot suit" race riots of June 1943. Conflicts over race and ethnicity grew increasingly central to the California Popular Front in these years, and Carey McWilliams became one of its most eloquent voices. McWilliams had led the Steinbeck Committee in support of the struggles of migrant farmworkers in the late 1930s; during the war years he chaired the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and spoke out against the internment of Japanese Americans. McWilliams's series of books on race and the peoples of the United States, which I discuss in the final chapter, stands as one of the major intellectual accomplishments of the cultural front.

Both San Francisco and Los Angeles had, as we will see, a network of avant-garde proletarian artists and writers, but the Hollywood studios were without doubt the central cultural apparatus on the West Coast. So it is not surprising that the story of the California cultural front is in large part the story of the links between the left-wing labor movement of Bridges's CIO and the left-wing artists, writers, and craftspeople in the Hollywood studios, many of whom were veterans of New York's left-wing theater and Weimar's left-wing cinema. This alliance created many of the key Popular Front cultural organizations of the depression and war years: the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization, the magazines *Black and White* (which became *The Clipper*), *Equality*, and *Hollywood Quarterly*, and the California Labor Schools. Indeed, Chicana activist Josefina Fierro

de Bright was married to the radical screenwriter John Bright, and the Hollywood left, including Orson Welles and the Mexican American actors Rita Hayworth and Anthony Quinn, was active in the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee.

The Hollywood Popular Front was also the product of the drive to unionize the film industry's crafts, culminating in the bitter strikes by the Conference of Studio Unions in 1945 and 1946. The screenwriters were the leaders of the studio unions, and the 1947 investigation of the Hollywood Ten came to mark the beginning of the post-war attack on the Popular Front. If the garment workers' musical comedy, *Pins and Needles*, stands as an emblem of the New York Popular Front, the *noir* thrillers written by the studio's contract writers might be taken as the emblem of the Los Angeles Popular Front: for *noir* was, in Mike Davis's brilliant summary, a "fantastic convergence of American 'tough-guy' realism, Weimar expressionism, and existentialized Marxism—all focused on unmasking a 'bright, guilty place' (Welles) called Los Angeles."³¹

Since the major CIO unions hostile to the Communists had few West Coast members, and since the Communist Party was smaller, the California Popular Front was less divided internally; one finds fewer denunciations and recriminations among both Communists and non-Communist leftists on the West Coast than in New York. However, the California right was very powerful, and a state senate committee on un-American activities chaired by Jack Tenney launched a decade-long attack on the California left in 1941. By 1949, Harry Bridges was on trial for a third time, and a number of Latina and Filipino labor leaders faced deportation, including Luisa Moreno, Josefina Fierro de Bright, and Chris Mensalvas.³²

In the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest, the heartland of the largest CIO unions—the United Automobile Workers (UAW), the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), the United Mine Workers (UMW), and the United Electrical Workers (UE)—the Popular Front was largely a community-based unionism uniting CIO locals, ethnic fraternal organizations, and women's consumer activism. These cities included the eastern electrical cities, like Lynn, Massachusetts, and Schenectady, New York, where there were key UE locals at General Electric plants, and Philadelphia, home of UE locals at Philco, Westinghouse in South Philadelphia, and RCA across the river in Camden, New Jersey. Pittsburgh and the steel towns of the Monongahela Valley were the center of the USWA's strength, as well as of UE at Westinghouse in East Pittsburgh. Youngstown, Cleveland, Gary, and the Calumet region of southeast Chicago were centers of steelworker organization. Toledo had been the site of a general strike in 1934, and Akron was the center of the United Rubber Workers. The Michigan auto towns included Detroit, with Ford's River Rouge plant outside the city limits in Dearborn, and Flint, home of General Motors.

The left was particularly strong in Milwaukee, with its UAW local at Allis-Chalmers, and in Minneapolis, where teamsters had ignited a general strike in 1934. In these cities, as in the tobacco towns of the Piedmont and the mining towns of West Virginia, Kentucky, and the Southwest, the Popular Front was less a cross-class cultural alliance than the shape that working-class politics and culture took, united by what Elizabeth Cohen has called the CIO's "culture of unity." Unlike the cultures of the skilled trades, whose focus was the workplace, the CIO's culture of unity was built on leisure and recreation, sponsoring labor radio stations, dances, picnics, summer camps, softball teams, and bowling leagues.³³

The Popular Front in the mining and metalworking cities and towns was a multi-ethnic and multi-racial movement, but it had a substantial Eastern European base. By World War II, 51 percent of the workers in heavy industry were Slavic, and Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit all had large Slovenian, Croatian, Slovak, Hungarian, and Polish communities. As a result, the infrastructure of the Popular Front social movement lay in the ethnic fraternal associations, like the Slovene National Benefit Society and the national sections of the International Workers Order (a federation of left-wing orders including the Polonia Society, the Hungarian Brotherhood, the Slovak Workers' Society, the Croatian Benevolent Fraternity, and the Serbian-American Fraternal Society). The ethnic lodges provided meeting places for the CIO organizing committees and supported ethnic language newspapers, theater groups, mandolin orchestras, and singing societies. A group of activists, editors, and intellectuals—figures like the Slovenian writer Louis Adamic, the Polish Communist CIO organizers from Detroit Stanley Nowak and Boleslaw "Bill" Gebert, and the Polish Socialist Leo Krzycki, the vice president of the ACWA—were the moving forces behind the wartime American Slav Congress, an influential Popular Front alliance of twelve Eastern European ethnic groups, not unlike the National Negro Congress and El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española.³⁴

For the most part, the Popular Front of the metalworking cities had few connections to the national culture industries and institutions of New York and California. Though the heroic conflicts of Little Steel and Flint were often represented in the labor reportage and novels of the Popular Front, there were relatively few young artists and intellectuals of the Slavic working class recruited from the local theaters, newspapers, and polka bands into the national industries of film, publishing, and music. One exception was the Group Theatre actor Karl Malden, who appeared in the Group's production of Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* and was best known for his work in Elia Kazan's productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *On the Waterfront*. Malden, born Mladen Sekulovich, first appeared on stage in the Serbian theater of Gary, Indiana, where his father, Peter Sekulovich, was a leading performer. Similarly, the anti-Communist purges in Hollywood,

New York, and Washington have received far more attention than the purge of the steel industry in 1950; however, as David Caute has noted, "the violent epicenter of the anti-Communist eruption in postwar America was the steel city of Pittsburgh," where the paid informer Matthew Cvetik fingered hundreds of workers to HUAC, becoming the basis for the 1951 Hollywood film, *I Was a Communist for the FBI*.³⁵

This picture of the Popular Front in New York, California, and the metalworking Midwest illuminates the difficulties of offering a unified history of this social movement, for the Popular Front was a product of unequal developments across North America: particular histories of union successes or failures, the local balance of political forces, and regional formations of race and ethnicity.³⁶ Nevertheless, the life of the Popular Front social movement coincided with a particular history, which can be viewed as a conjuncture, a generation, and a transition between two epochs. That moment might be called the age of the CIO.

2. The Age of the CIO

To name a period—the "depression," the "thirties," the "New Deal," the "age of Roosevelt," "modernism," the "streamlined years," the "age of the CIO"—is already to argue about it. Much of the argument about this period has revolved around the issue of periodization itself. If the crash of 1929 is widely accepted as the beginning of the crisis, the "end" of the "thirties" is hotly disputed. W. H. Auden dated the end of the "low dishonest decade" in his famous poem "September 1, 1939," and many literary and cultural historians critical of the Popular Front have followed suit. Within five short years, they argue, the left cultural renaissance was over, lost in the betrayals of the Moscow Trials, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the onset of global war. For these memoirists and historians, the thirties tell a cautionary tale: a story of impetuous youthful radicalism, of seduction and betrayal, of a "god that failed."

For others, more sympathetic to thirties radicalism, the glory days were already over by the time *Waiting for Lefty* hit Broadway in the spring of 1935. For these critics, the 1935 American Writers' Congress betrayed the young writers of the John Reed Clubs; the documentaries of Frontier Films failed to carry out the radical promise of the Workers Film and Photo League; and the Popular Front was a liberal sentimental façade replacing the radical vigor of the early 1930s. Malcolm Cowley's memoir of the 1930s ends in the summer of 1935, summarizing the last half of the decade in twenty pages; similarly, Daniel Aaron's durable history abandons its narrative in 1935 and concludes by looking at the disenchantment of half a dozen figures.³⁷

For a third group, closer to the perspectives of the Popular Front itself,

the thirties ended with the Henry Wallace campaign of 1948 and the onset of the Cold War. For them, the rise of McCarthy, the Hollywood blacklist, and the execution of the Rosenbergs mark the end of the period as clearly as the Moscow Trials, the Spanish Civil War, and the Nazi-Soviet Pact did for the various anti-Communists.³⁸

All of these attempts to date the end, to mark the betrayal of the hopes born out of the depression, remain tied to the time of biography, the scarring of private lives by public events. However, to begin to capture the complexities of this period, we need several time frames: the conjunctural, the generational, and the epochal. A "conjuncture" was Gramsci's useful term for the immediate terrain of struggle: "[W]hen an historical period comes to be studied," Gramsci notes, "the great importance of this distinction becomes clear. A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves . . . and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts . . . form the terrain of the 'conjunctural,' and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise."³⁹

The decades following 1929—the age of the CIO—are just such a crisis. The crash of 1929 triggered what Gramsci called a "crisis of hegemony" in the United States, a moment when social classes became detached from their traditional parties, a "situation of conflict between 'represented and representatives'." The years of depression and war saw a prolonged "war of position" between political forces trying to conserve the existing structures of society and the forces of opposition, including the Popular Front social movement, who were trying to create a new historical bloc, a new balance of forces. The eventual post-war "settlement," marked by the famous 1950 General Motors-UAW contract, which *Fortune* called the "Treaty of Detroit," depended on the defeat of the Popular Front and the post-war purge of the left from the CIO and the cultural apparatus. If the metaphor of the front suggests a place where contending forces meet, the complementary metaphor of the conjuncture suggests the time of the battle.⁴⁰

From this point of view, the history of the Popular Front might be seen as a series of offensives and retreats on the "terrain of the conjunctural." The first great surge was the revolutionary season from the summer of 1933 through 1934, with remarkable unrest among the unemployed, veterans (the Bonus Army march), and farmers (the Farmer's Holiday movement), culminating in a wave of strikes following the National Industrial Recovery Act, including the left-led general strikes of 1934 in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. Though Hitler's rise to power in Germany in early 1933 and the fascist destruction of Vienna's Socialists in

early 1934 were ominous developments, they too seemed to be signs of the disintegration of the old order. Even in the United States, the propertied classes genuinely feared insurrection and revolution, and young radicals imagined a Soviet America. This was the moment of the "proletarian avant-garde" as young communist writers and artists produced a wave of little magazines and exhibitions.⁴¹

The second great surge began in the fall of 1936 and continued through the spring and summer of 1937: kicked off by the CIO victories in Akron and Flint, it was the year of "sit-down fever." The elections of Popular Front governments in Spain (February 1936) and France (May 1936) raised the hopes of socialists around the world; Franco's revolt against the Spanish Republic in July 1936 led to two years of US organizing in solidarity with the Spanish Loyalist government. These were the years when the term "Popular Front" emerged as the characteristic name of the movement. Nineteen thirty-seven was the year of the great Popular Front theatrical events: the Mercury Theatre's musical of Steeltown, USA, *The Cradle Will Rock*; the musical revue staged by New York garment workers, *Pins and Needles*; and the documentary film of the Spanish Civil War, *The Spanish Earth*. The summer of 1937 was one of the most violent in the history of American workers: eighteen workers were killed that summer, beginning with the Memorial Day Massacre, when Chicago police killed ten steelworkers and wounded dozens at Republic Steel. The defeat at Little Steel, and mounting unemployment in the fall of 1937, dampened the movement. If the August 1936 hearings of Senator La Follette's Civil Liberties Committee on labor espionage and strikebreaking mark the beginning of this wave, the August 1938 hearings of Congressman Dies's Un-American Activities Committee mark its end.

The defeat of the Spanish Republic in early 1939, the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, and the onset of war in Europe were deeply discouraging, and marked a crisis for the Popular Front. Nevertheless, during the fall of 1940 and the spring and summer of 1941, there was an often-overlooked resurgence. Although it had made little headway since 1937, the CIO led one of the largest strike waves in US history in 1941, winning both at Ford's River Rouge plant and against the firms that made up Little Steel. "The year 1940 had been one of UE success," a UE leader later wrote. "But 1941 topped everything . . . [it was] UE's peak year for organization and economic gains." Nineteen forty-one also marked the beginning of the modern civil rights movement: the March on Washington Movement, led by A. Philip Randolph, won black workers jobs in the defense industries and led to the creation of the FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Commission). In 1941, the New York Popular Front elected the first black city council member, Adam Clayton Powell, and the first Communist city council member, Pete Cacchione. The spring of 1941 saw the opening of

the Mercury Theatre's production of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as well as the release of *Citizen Kane*. Duke Ellington's "socially conscious" revue, *Jump for Joy*, played in Los Angeles through the summer of 1941. In June 1941, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, and in December the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, bringing the US into the war; very quickly, the social struggle was subordinated to war mobilization.⁴²

The fourth surge was from the summer of 1943 through the election of 1944: the wartime Popular Front. In the face of a summer of hate strikes and race riots in 1943, the "labor victory front" linked the call for a second front in the anti-fascist war to a vision of post-war decolonization and a social democratic "century of the common man." The formation of CIO-PAC to support Roosevelt marked the labor movement's most ambitious electoral campaign, outlining a "people's platform" for the post-war world. In New York, Powell was elected to Congress, and Benjamin Davis was elected to the city council in his place. An important defeat at this stage was Roosevelt's choice of Truman over Henry Wallace for vice president.

The Popular Front's final offensive was from V-J Day in August 1945 through 1946, when the CIO launched a massive strike wave: by 1 February, 1946 over a quarter of the CIO's membership was on strike in what was the "most massive strike episode in American history." There were general strikes in a half-dozen US cities, including Houston, Pittsburgh, and Oakland, and a series of bitter strikes in the Hollywood studios. The CIO launched Operation Dixie, an attempt to organize the South, and the Popular Front social movement seemed to be moving again. But the fall of 1946 saw the beginning of the end: the first Republican Congress since 1932 was elected, and Truman dismissed Henry Wallace as secretary of commerce. With the announcement of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan in the spring of 1947, the Cold War had begun in earnest. Within a year, the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act was passed (June 1947), repealing the rights labor had won during the New Deal and requiring a non-Communist affidavit from union officers; and a revived House Committee on Un-American Activities called the Hollywood Ten to testify (fall 1947). When the Communists staged a coup against the Popular Front government in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, all hopes of an alternative to the Cold War seemed futile. Though Henry Wallace's Progressive Party presidential campaign in 1948 brought together some fractions of the Popular Front, the campaign was a disaster, and the CIO's leadership used it as a way of beginning its purge of Communist-led unions, removing Harry Bridges from his position as regional director. Within the next two years, eleven unions and a million members were driven out of the CIO as a result of the anti-Communist purge; the southern organizing drive failed. By 1949, a Gallup Poll found that support for socialism had dropped to 15 percent. Though a Popular Front subculture persisted through the 1950s,

blacklisted and in internal disarray, the backbone of the Popular Front social movement was broken.⁴³

In another sense, however, the culture of the Popular Front, the culture of the "thirties," lasted well into the post-war era. The divisions—both political and cultural—on the American left at midcentury seem, to a historian's eye, less absolute. As I will argue, there is more continuity between the "proletarian culture movement" and the "Popular Front" than appeared to the advocates of one or the other. The traumatic rifts between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists, between the literary figures of the *New Masses* and those of *Partisan Review*, even between the Hollywood Communists and the New York intellectuals, often conceal deeper continuities. In 1947, Richard Hofstadter, himself one of the New York intellectuals, saw his study of *The American Political Tradition* as a response to and critique of Popular Front versions of American history, and it surely was. But a preface he wrote twenty years later suggests another way of looking at his own book:

[I]t seemed to me that I had been looking at certain characters in American political history not only somewhat from the political left but also from outside the tradition itself, and that from this external angle of vision the differences that seemed very sharp and decisive to those who dwelt altogether within it had begun to lose their distinctness, and that men on different sides of a number of questions appeared as having more in common, in the end, than one originally imagined.⁴⁴

One can say as much of the "Old Left," particularly in the world of culture. "Despite the sharp political differences that separated us from the Communists," the Trotskyist activist Paul Jacobs recalled,

we were culturally dependent upon the Communists and their web of peripheral and supporting organizations, for the American Trotskyist movement had no folk-singing groups, no foreign-language associations, no fraternal orders, no hiking clubs, no classes in drama, nor any of the varied other activities which made the "What's Doing" column in the *Daily Worker* so long every day.

The "What's Doing" column was an important part of our daily reading, even though we were Trotskyists. If we wanted to see a movie about the Russian Revolution, we had to go to the Cameo Theatre on Fourteenth Street, where we would sit in the balcony, cracking sunflower seeds with our teeth, and giggle at the more blatant examples of Stalinist propaganda. Sometimes, as when the screen showed a Russian girl falling asleep to dream of a luminous, fatherly Stalin tossing her baby high in his arms and chucking it under the chin, we would laugh—but always surreptitiously, lest some of the Stalinist faithful in the downstairs section hear us and come up to start a fight. But we thrilled at the heroics in Eisenstein's *Potemkin* and, no matter how often I saw it, the scene in *Chapayev* when the Red Army finally overcomes the White Russians always sent

shivers through my body. So, too, when the proletarian heroes, the union members and organizers, rushed out onto the stage in the last scene of the plays presented by the New Theatre League at the old Civic Repertory Theatre, I responded just as viscerally as did any Communist.

Thus mine is less a story of political divisions than of cultural continuities; the culture of the Popular Front represented a larger laboring of American culture, which political adversaries often shared in shaping.⁴⁵

The Popular Front might in this way be seen as a structure of feeling, to use Raymond Williams's phrase. This concept reminds us that decades are by no means the most adequate way of periodizing cultural history; between the punctual events of a decade and the wider horizon of an epoch (modernism or Fordism) lies the generation. Williams himself suggested the affinity between a structure of feeling and a generation when he argued that "one generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling. . . . [T]he new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting." To see the Popular Front as a structure of feeling is thus to see it as a political and cultural charter for a generation. This is why many figures who broke decisively with the Communist Party, like Richard Wright or Elia Kazan, did not really break with the Popular Front, and continued to produce works within a Popular Front structure of feeling: there is a clear continuity between Kazan's minor acting role in *Waiting for Lefty* and his direction of the 1954 film *On the Waterfront*, one of the greatest "proletarian" dramas.⁴⁶

From this generational point of view, the end of the Popular Front is neither 1939 nor 1948. Rather, it has two ends. The first is in the early 1960s when a "New Left" appears; from the beginning, the New Left was understood not only as a break with earlier ideologies and organizations, but as a new structure of feeling characterizing a post-war generation. Henceforth, both protagonists and antagonists of the Popular Front would be called the "Old Left." Nevertheless, the figures of the Old Left continued to work through the 1960s and 1970s, and many of the most interesting works of the cultural front are products of the second half of the century, as artists and writers formed in the age of the CIO embodied its concerns, its narratives, and its icons in works of a postmodern epoch. The films directed by Martin Ritt (like *Norma Rae* [1979] or *The Molly Maguires* [1970]) and Sidney Lumet (particularly *Serpico* [1973], *Daniel* [1983], and *Q&A* [1990]) and those written by Waldo Salt (*Serpico*) and Ring Lardner, Jr. (*M.A.S.H.* [1970]) are, like the writings of Tillie Olsen, E.L. Doctorow, and Ernesto Galarza, embodiments of a Popular Front structure of feeling. Thus, the second end of the Popular Front is the

result of the gradual death of the depression cohort in the last decades of the twentieth century.⁴⁷

However, if the notion of a structure of feeling is to be more than a way of characterizing the mood of a generation, the fundamental task remains, as Fredric Jameson has noted, "that of coordinating new forms of practice and social and mental habits (this is . . . what . . . Williams . . . had in mind by the notion of a 'structure of feeling') with the new forms of economic production and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism." Thus, in order to understand the rise and fall of the Popular Front social movement, the conjunctural and generational frames must be accompanied by an epochal one: one must triangulate the conjuncture and the generation with those larger narratives that make up our sense of cultural history, in this case the narratives of modernism and postmodernism, Fordism and post-Fordism. That the moment of the Popular Front—the age of the CIO—is usually visible only as an interregnum, a dead end, the "thirties," is a result, I suggest, of its seeming to fall outside those larger stories of modernism and postmodernism, Fordism and post-Fordism. However, the Popular Front, the age of the CIO, stands, not as another epoch, but as the promise of a different road beyond modernism, a road not taken, a vanishing mediator. It was a moment of transition between the Fordist modernism that reigned before the crash, and the postmodernism of the American Century that emerged from the ruins of Hiroshima.⁴⁸

"Modern times," the half-century between the 1890s and the 1940s, were what economic historians have called a "long wave" in capitalist development, comprising a period of growth and expansion from the late 1890s to World War I and a period of stagnation and contraction from World War I to World War II. "In a purely economic sense, capitalism seemed set for a long and untroubled future around 1900," Eric Hobsbawm writes. "The international capitalist economy . . . had, by and large, . . . an astonishing run for its money . . . until 1914." These "modern times" that emerged from the deep depression of the 1890s had been built on the defeat of the Populists and Knights of Labor; on a racial regime of segregation and sharecropping based on black disenfranchisement, Jim Crow legislation, and lynching; on the massive importation of migrant laborers from Southern and Eastern Europe; and on the exercise of imperial muscle in the Caribbean and the Pacific. Politically, the Republican Party dominated the nation, holding the White House from the McKinley election of 1896 until 1932, with the brief interlude of Woodrow Wilson, who came to power only when Taft and Theodore Roosevelt split the Republican Party.⁴⁹

This economy was built on the technologies of oil, rubber, and steel fabricated into the automobile, and on the patterns of work and leisure to which Ford gave his name: the reorganization of work by the assembly line and the remaking of leisure by the family car and the five-dollar day. The

opening of the Highland Park assembly line in 1915 stands as the symbolic inauguration of the Fordist labor process, combining the production of standardized parts using standardized machine tools, a continuous assembly line which brought the work to the worker in massive plants, and a workforce of semiskilled machine operators controlled by engineers and designers, embodying the Taylorist dream of separating conception from execution. The announcement of the five-dollar, eight-hour day for all workers who could pass Ford's Sociological Department's examination of "the clean and wholesome life" on 1 January 1914 marked the symbolic initiation of Fordist mass consumption, the sense that mass production requires a working-class consumer.

Thus, modernism itself might be understood as the culture of Fordism, schizophrenically divided between the functionalist machine aesthetic of Ford himself, who wished to produce one generic car, reduced to essentials, without frills or useless parts, in any color the customer wanted "as long as it is black," and the aesthetic of packaging pioneered by Alfred Sloan of General Motors, who captured Ford's market by offering new styles, new models, new colors. But modernism also became the name of the cultural ferment of the early decades of the century. The experimental avant-gardes mixed sexual and artistic radicalism with sympathies for the revolutions in Mexico and Czarist Russia, and had a lasting impact on the more widespread youth countercultures of the 1910s and 1920s, what Malcolm Cowley later called a "revolution in morals which began as a middle class children's revolt." For modernism marked a transformation of gender relations: part of the generational revolt against the "Victorian" was a refusal of the patriarch. The first two decades of the century were a high point of the woman's movement: these years were dominated by the struggle for women's suffrage, by the emergence of a "new woman," and by the invention of a new term—"feminism." There were close connections between women's rights, sexual radicalism, and the artistic renaissance: indeed, in 1917, the New York *Evening Sun* was noting that "some people think women are the cause of modernism, whatever that is."⁵⁰

Thus, modernism came to be the expression of the dreams, discontents, and cultural contradictions of the disaffected young people of the predominantly Anglo bourgeoisie as they came to grips with the changes in the corporate economy and the changes in proper sexuality and gender roles, with the new imperialism, with the "foreign hordes" of immigrant workers. They had broken from the genteel tradition because they were caught directly between capital and labor: they were the settlement house activists, the social scientists like Walter Wyckoff who disguised themselves to see how the other half lives, the journalists like John Reed and Mary Heaton Vorse who went from Harvard and Provincetown to witness revolutionary struggles in Paterson, New Jersey, Lawrence, Massachusetts, Mexico, and

Russia, and the experimental, expatriate writers and artists like Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot. They dominated the renaissance in American culture because they attempted to represent the world of Fordism, to capture the new.

The age of the CIO grew out of the crisis of this modernism, a crisis figured by the crash of 1929. The CIO had itself emerged in the heartland of the Fordist economy and culture, in the industries that mass-produced automobiles and radios. Its unions were built by the children of the modernist migration, challenging the strikebreakers and private police of Ford, General Motors, US Steel, General Electric, and Westinghouse. The Liberty League, the now largely forgotten alliance of capitalists led by the Du Ponts, dominated the Popular Front imagination, as did the giant fortunes of J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, William Randolph Hearst, and the Mellons. The culture of the age of the CIO was built by the children of the modernist arts, struggling to assimilate and transcend its legacy of formalist experiment. The opening shots of the cultural front were the narratives of modernist disenchantment, like Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* and Caroline Ware's *Greenwich Village*. The young artists and intellectuals of the age of the CIO inherited the mantle of modernism, naming their clubs for the legendary John Reed, but, as I will argue later, they sought to create a new social modernism, a "revolutionary symbolism."

Nevertheless, the success of the CIO and the Popular Front social movement depended on the world of Fordism and modernism; and as the continental shelf of Fordism and modernism began to slip in the midst of the Second World War, revealing the first glimpses of the world we now call post-Fordism or postmodernism, the fault lines in the Popular Front social movement began to appear, cracks first evident in the 1943 riots in the war-boom cities across the continent. By the time these fault lines had entirely reshaped US society, the Popular Front social movement had vanished, together with its vision of a social democracy.

There were four aspects of this midcentury earthquake: the shift from modern to postmodern gender relations and household formations; a racial revolution that inaugurated a postmodern racial regime; the largest internal migration in US history, a migration of black and white southerners to the North, remaking the industrial working class; and the "third technological revolution" and the emergence of a post-Fordist economy. Despite the attempts by Popular Front activists to respond to these changes, each disorganized the Popular Front social movement.

The question of whether the Second World War was a watershed in the history of US gender relations and household formations remains a contentious point among historians of women: the very visibility of the recruitment of women workers into the war industries, and the popular iconography of Rosie the Riveter that accompanied that recruitment, has

made it difficult to assess whether the changes that took place were superficial or lasting.⁵¹ Moreover, changes in the social organization of sex and gender are hard to register by decades or even by generations; conceptions of manhood and womanhood, of parenting and growing up, change slowly, even glacially. So it is difficult to correlate these changes with changes in culture and the arts, let alone with changes in political regimes.

Nevertheless, there are periods of intensified conflict between men and women, children and parents, periods of gender strife—which the early part of the century called “sex antagonism,” the middle part of the century, the “battle of the sexes,” and the end of the century, “sexual politics”—rooted in changes in the sexual division of labor. As the literary historians Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it: “the sexes battle because sex roles change, but, when the sexes battle, sex itself (that is, eroticism) changes.” Transformations in the way work is done and divided, whether wage work, childrearing work, the work of consumption, or the unwaged work of maintaining a household, lead to an unsettling of customary stories of manhood and womanhood, in forms and ideologies of sexuality.⁵²

Thus, whether or not the changes wrought by Rosie the Riveter have been overemphasized, it seems clear that the period between 1929 and 1948 marked a moment of crisis and transformation in the sexual organization of work, in gender relations, and in household formations. The modernist gender system, forged from the revolt of young women and young men against Victorian patriarchy and manifest in the emergence of what Lois Banner has called “fashion culture,” was rocked by the crash of 1929. If the depression years were not a moment of feminist militancy, they were surely a time of gender strife and change: many commentators at the time noted the crisis in masculinity that accompanied the massive unemployment of the depression; the birthrate “dropped precipitously” by 1933; there was a renewed ideological attack on married women workers, who became a scapegoat for the depression; and there was a national outcry about the state of mothering and the evils of “momism” during the war years. These two decades saw the beginnings of what might be seen as the shift from a modern to a postmodern gender formation.⁵³

First, there was a remarkable increase in the proportion of *married* women working for wages. Despite the depression campaign to eliminate married women from the labor force and to strengthen the “marriage bar,” the percentage of married women in the wage-labor force increased between 1930 and 1940; and by 1950, the rate was twice what it had been in 1930. As one historian has noted, “it is no wonder that even as early as the 1920’s, social commentators shifted their attention from the plight of the single working woman to that of the married woman.” In large part, this increase in married women workers was a consequence of the shifts in

the overall occupational structure; it was not that women joined men in occupations, but that sectors of the economy employing women grew in the midcentury decades. As several studies have shown, even in the wartime mass-production industries, job segregation by sex continued, as women worked in women’s departments and in jobs newly defined as “women’s jobs,” and those gains did not, for the most part, survive the war. Thus, the lifting of the marriage bar in teaching and clerical work by about 1950 was responsible for much of the increase in married women workers.⁵⁴

Second, there was a marked decrease in domestic service. In the early part of the century, more women worked in domestic service than in any other occupation, and domestic service was racially and ethnically structured: in the Northeast, most domestic workers were European immigrant women; in the South, most were African Americans; in the Southwest, most were Chicanas; and in the West, most were Asian. The Second World War marked a dramatic decline in domestic service, particularly among white women. The major growth in women’s employment came in clerical work and in commercial services. By 1930, clerical work was already the single most important occupational group for white women, despite the fact that married women were largely excluded from it. With the disappearance of the marriage bar by 1950, women of the depression cohort who had had greater high-school education swelled the ranks of clerical workers (women of color remained excluded from clerical work until the 1960s).⁵⁵

These changes in women’s employment were part of far-reaching shifts in household structure. If the household is the basic unit of social reproduction, the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism has seen the growing commercialization of the household’s reproductive functions; as a result, there have been remarkable shifts in the kinds of households and in the relations within households. With the decline in child labor and the rise in schooling in the first half of the century, relations between parents and children altered, as children were less a resource, contributing to the household budget, than an investment requiring resources: this paralleled a long-term decline in the birth rate. The decline in domestic service was matched by a rise in commercial services, particularly food service: the 1930s mark both the growth and feminization of commercial food service.⁵⁶

Moreover, the expansion of the state apparatuses in this period is in large part due to the increasing involvement of the state in the household: the early welfare state was in part devised by “progressive maternalists,” and the conflict between mothers and social workers runs throughout the working-class fiction of the period. The WPA day nurseries, established to provide relief work for teachers, nurses, and nutritionists, marked the first federal support of child care, and the 1941 Lanham Act funded the construction of child-care centers for war workers.⁵⁷

These commercial and state interventions in the household accompanied the rise of a new sexual economy. The "companionate marriage," a phrase that dates from the mid 1920s, was built around birth control and the right of divorce, and placed an "unprecedented emphasis on the importance of sexual gratification in marriage." In turn, new households based on gay and lesbian sexual ties emerged, and the Second World War saw the development of an urban gay and lesbian subculture which would become a fundamental part of the postmodern household formation.⁵⁸

These changes in work patterns and household structures had profound consequences for the Popular Front social movement, which remained closely linked to the characteristic household form of the mass-production industries, with its emphasis on the "family wage" of the male worker. This is not to say that women were not central to the Popular Front: in New York, the women workers of the garment trades were at the heart of the Popular Front, and this was, as we shall see, why *Pins and Needles* became a key cultural icon of the moment. Moreover, since the Popular Front was in many ways a community-based social movement—epitomized perhaps in the citywide general strikes of 1934 and 1946—the key community organizers were often women. Finally, though the entry of women into the wartime mass-production industries was often tense and difficult, it rarely manifested itself in anti-women hate strikes. For the most part, the CIO unions actively recruited and supported women workers.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the forms of organizing that would come to dominate post-Fordism—the organization of clerical and service workers, and the sexual politics of the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movements—did not emerge in the Popular Front. Women were usually imagined as "auxiliaries" in the struggle, and only rarely did a Popular Front feminism develop. Perhaps the first explicit Popular Front feminism appeared in the work of Mary Inman and Elizabeth Hawes. Inman's controversial study of women's oppression, *In Woman's Defense*, was serialized in the *People's World*, the voice of the California Popular Front in 1939 and 1940; and Elizabeth Hawes's labor feminism, which I will discuss at length later, took shape in her "News for Living" columns in *PM*, the New York Popular Front tabloid. The first organizational forms of Popular Front feminism came after the Second World War: the Congress of American Women was formed in November 1945 and the 1945 equal pay bill became a key focus for both the CIO and womens groups. But these initiatives fell victim to the Cold War. Similarly, the Popular Front social movement never developed a self-conscious political struggle for gay or lesbian rights; however, when the first gay political organization, the Mattachine Society, was formed in 1950, all its founders, most notably its early leader Harry Hay, were Popular Front activists who had met through the left-wing labor school, the People's Educational Center, where Hay taught courses in music.⁶⁰

The second aspect of the midcentury earthquake that shook the Popular Front was the racial revolution of the 1940s, the transition from a modern racial regime to a postmodern one. The racialization of peoples had long been a fundamental aspect of settler colonial societies like the United States. Since land was cheap and labor expensive, various forms of forced and imported labor reigned, class structures were racialized, and the white settlers developed racial ideologies of creole exceptionalism. Nevertheless, as Stuart Hall reminds us, this history is not a single, uninterrupted story: there is no racism, only *racisms*. In the United States, the modern racial formation emerged in the years after the Civil War. The end of the systems of forced labor in the 1860s—US slavery, Russian serfdom, and Australian transportation—marked not only a remarkable expansion of global labor migration and the rise of the "new imperialism" in the late nineteenth century, but also the birth of the modern racial systems with their legal codes of segregation, exclusion, reservations, and anti-miscegenation. In the United States, the end of Reconstruction and the restoration of white supremacy in the South were accompanied by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Dawes Act of 1887, which undermined the tribal land ownership of Americans Indians, and the colonial conquests of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.⁶¹

This racial regime of modernism began to unravel in the midst of World War II. Nineteen forty-two and 1943 were years of exceptional racial conflict. In early 1942, 110,000 Japanese Americans were evacuated to assembly centers at racetracks and fairgrounds and were then interned in camps in remote desert areas of the West. In the spring and summer of 1942, race riots over public housing and "hate strikes"—white workers refusing to work with black workers—broke out throughout Detroit. Similar hate strikes occurred in Mobile, Baltimore, and Gary in 1943, culminating in the long transitworkers strike in Philadelphia in the summer of 1944, in which white streetcar employees walked out to protest the upgrading of black workers: 5,000 federal troops were called in to restore order. In June 1943, young Chicanos, Filipinos, and African Americans wearing zoot suits were stopped, stripped, and beaten by white servicemen in Los Angeles. These "zoot-suit riots" went on for a week and spread across the country in cities where servicemen were stationed: in Philadelphia, twenty-five whites attacked four blacks wearing zoot suits on 12 June. The zoot-suit riots triggered a wave of race riots throughout the summer of 1943: in San Diego, Philadelphia, Chicago, Evansville, Beaumont, Detroit, and Harlem.⁶²

The internment camps, hate strikes, and race riots were symptoms of a dramatic reshaping of the American racial regime, a postmodern rewriting of the color line that derived from new relations to Asia and Latin America and the emergence of a powerful civil rights movement. The war with

Japan marked the beginning of thirty-five years of war in Asia, as the United States was covertly or overtly involved in wars and insurrections in the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The Asian American communities were deeply affected by the mobilizations and migrations that accompanied these wars. During the Second World War, while Japanese and Korean Americans were regarded as enemy aliens, Filipinos were allowed to become citizens for the first time, and the Chinese Exclusion Acts were repealed.⁶³

The war was also a watershed in hemispheric relations. The 1942 Bracero Program recruited thousands of Mexican agricultural workers to release US farmworkers for the war plants and military; and by 1956 Mexican Americans made up a quarter of all US farmworkers. Puerto Rico's "Operation Bootstrap" of 1945 marked the beginning of the major migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland.

Meanwhile, the national March on Washington Movement to protest the racist hiring practices of the new defense industries marked the beginning of a powerful new African American civil rights movement. Organized by the foremost black labor leader, A. Philip Randolph, the March on Washington Movement held demonstrations across the country to prepare for the 1 July 1941 march. Though the march was called off when Roosevelt met with Randolph and agreed to outlaw discrimination in the defense industries, the organization and militancy of African Americans continued to grow: the NAACP's membership multiplied ninefold during the war and the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) was founded in 1943.⁶⁴

In many ways, the Popular Front was more prepared for the racial realignments of the war years than for the gender realignments. The Popular Front social movement had been built around a politics of anti-racism and anti-imperialism and had struggled for an interracial movement. Moreover, the infrastructure of the Popular Front was made up of an intricate network of ethnic fraternal associations, foreign-language newspapers, and arts clubs that supported a kind of "cultural nationalism," emphasizing the distinctive histories of the peoples of the United States. The CIO unions, particularly the left-led unions, had actively worked to organize African American, Asian American, and Latino workers, and fought against the hate strikes and zoot-suit riots. One of the major successes of the wartime CIO was the ILWU's organization of Filipino and Japanese American plantation workers in Hawaii. The campaign to strengthen and enforce the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) continued throughout the war years. Though the Communist Party did not protest the internment of Japanese Americans and even suspended their Japanese American members, the West Coast Popular Front spoke out against the camps: Louis Goldblatt, the secretary-treasurer of the California CIO and Harry Bridges's right-hand man, was one of the few

who testified against the internment order at the start, and Carey McWilliams, perhaps the leading intellectual of the California Popular Front, became one of the few white critics of the camps, spending three years visiting them, writing about them, and speaking against them on the radio. From Paul Robeson's 1939 version of Earl Robinson's "Ballad for Americans" to Frank Sinatra's 1945 version of Earl Robinson's "The House I Live In," the anthems of the Popular Front were pleas for racial and ethnic tolerance.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the Popular Front was dramatically dis-organized by the central cause of the racial realignment of the 1940s: the massive migration of white and black southerners to the war-industry cities of the North and West, a migration that remade the working classes. It was the largest internal migration in US history: not only did southwesterners—"Okies" and "Arkies"—continue to pour into California, but a million people left the southern Appalachians in each of the two decades of the 1940s and 1950s. One historian has estimated that between 8 and 12 million white southerners left the South in the quarter century after 1945. In addition, 4.5 million black southerners left the South's Black Belt between 1940 and 1970, between 12 and 15 percent of the South's black population; 90 percent of black southerners moved to six states: California, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York. In some ways, the full extent of the black migration is disguised by the additional migration to cities within the South. At the peak of southern sharecropping in 1920, half of all black Americans lived on farms; by 1984, that had dropped to 1 percent.⁶⁶

The effect of the migration on US national culture was tremendous; the years after midcentury saw a "southernization" of American culture. Before 1954, the South was another country, another people, the land of the defeated Confederacy, ruled by large landowners and home to a system of sharecropping and segregation. One of the characteristic forms of pre-World War II national culture was the "southern", as much a genre as the western, including mythical tales of the Civil War like *Gone with the Wind* and sensational fictions of sharecropper life like Erskine Caldwell's salacious bestsellers. The migration of millions of southerners transformed the national culture. The most successful popular musics in the post-war years were those that had been called "race" and "hillbilly" and were now renamed "rhythm and blues" and "country." Similarly, a southern "regional" writer whose works were largely out of print at the end of the war, William Faulkner, became recognized as the leading "national" novelist, winning a Nobel Prize. In part, this was because Faulkner was one of the few white writers who dealt with the legacy of slavery and the racial divide. As I shall argue later, most of his white contemporaries who had been highly regarded—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos—had

evaded the issue of race, or, to put it slightly differently, had been unable to imagine a racial story.⁶⁷

The relations between black and white Americans took on a dramatic new centrality in the culture as a whole; what had earlier often seemed to be a problem of the Jim Crow South was now a national divide. The cities that emerged from the migration were extremely segregated: sociologists who study residential segregation by statistical measures of "relative isolation" have found that the highest rate of isolation ever recorded for an ethnic group—Milwaukee's Italians in 1910—was the same as the lowest rate for black Americans in 1970 (in San Francisco). A history of urban disinvestment, slum clearance in neighborhoods adjoining white neighborhoods, and the construction of high-density public housing to contain the black population, combined with the government subsidy of mortgages and highways to build white suburbs, created a new Black Belt Nation, not the Black Belt of the cotton South, but an archipelago of cities across the continent: this *de facto* apartheid became the dominant social fact of American social life in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶⁸

The South-to-North migration and the world it created dis-organized the Popular Front social movement. The race riots and the hate strikes of the war years were emblems of these tensions, as the CIO unions, which had signed a no-strike pledge for the duration of the war, were experienced by the new workers as an alien power: not their representatives, but part of the discipline of the workplace. Just at the moment when the CIO working class, those Italian, Polish, Slavic, and Jewish ethnics of whom Robeson and Sinatra sang, gained a measure of cultural, political, and economic power, they were faced with a new working class. Whereas the CIO working class had deep roots in European radicalisms—Jewish socialism and communism, Italian anarchism, and Finnish communism, among others—the southern migrants came with little history of left-wing radicalism. The white populism of the South and Southwest was in some cases inflected by the residual socialism of the Debsian party—Woody Guthrie is an emblem of that tradition—but more often tinged with the Klan. There were exceptions, but even the militant unionism and underground Communism of rural sharecroppers, miners, and textileworkers was based in a cultural world foreign to the urban Popular Fronts of the North. If the ethnic fraternal lodges of the IWO served as a seed bed for the CIO and the Popular Front, the black and white holiness and Pentecostal churches of the southern and southwestern migrants rarely became part of the Popular Front social movement.⁶⁹

Moreover, the cultural divide between the predominantly Catholic and Jewish workers of the CIO generation and the new southerners, black and white, was tremendous; this conflict stood at the center of the great proletarian novel of midcentury, Harriette Arnow's epic narrative of the

migration of the Nevels family from Kentucky to Detroit, *The Dollmaker*. It could also be seen in the divide between the swing of Frank Sinatra, Benny Goodman, and Count Basie, and the rhythm and blues of Hank Williams, Muddy Waters, and Elvis Presley. By the 1960s, an anthem written by the Oklahoma migrant Woody Guthrie, "This Land Is Your Land," had not only displaced the Earl Robinson anthems sung by Paul Robeson and Frank Sinatra, but Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" as well. The failure of the CIO's southern initiatives—both the pre-war Textile Workers Organizing Committee aimed at the largest group of southern industrial workers, and the post-war Operation Dixie—loomed larger and larger as Dixie became America.⁷⁰

If this religious, ethnic, and cultural divide within the working classes broke up the fragile alliances built by the Popular Front, the emerging labor processes of post-Fordism weakened the industrial home of the CIO unions. As Robert Hill has noted, "the word 'automation' was coined around 1946 by the automobile industry to describe the introduction of automatic devices and controls to mechanize production." The development of these computer-controlled machine tools transformed the labor process of the semiskilled machine operatives, who were the heart of the CIO mass-production unions, weakening the shop-floor systems of power that industrial unionism had won and reducing the size of the labor force. As industrial production shifted from economies of scale to economies of scope, avoiding the rigidities of large-scale production by subcontracting and small-batch production, employment shifted away from goods production: in 1947, there was an even balance between employment in goods and services; by 1981, two-thirds of all workers were in services. Nineteen fifty-six was the first year when white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers. The CIO's inability to organize clerical and service workers, and to invent a labor feminism that spoke to the women working in the new offices, the "factories" of post-Fordism's information industries, was to weaken the Popular Front social movement.⁷¹

The Popular Front social movement grew out of the crisis of Fordist modernism, and it built a remarkable coalition for economic justice and civil rights and liberties. Its political defeat in the post-war settlement was due both to the dis-organizing social transformations of midcentury and the strength of its adversaries. The capitalist revival in the years after the war sustained the anti-Communist crusade at home and abroad, and clinched the victory of Henry Luce's vision of an American Century over Henry Wallace's social democratic vision of a People's Century. Nevertheless, as Stuart Hall reminds us, "social forces which lose out in any particular historical period do not thereby disappear from the terrain of struggle; nor is struggle in such circumstances suspended." If the Popular Front was defeated on the political terrain, and the age of the CIO gave

way to the American Century, it nevertheless continued to have a deep influence on US culture.⁷²

For the Popular Front social movement had created and nurtured a new culture, a distinctive sensibility, aesthetic, and ideology, embodied in stories that were told again and again. It did not represent the entire US culture, nor did it ever become a dominant culture. But it left its mark on the institutions of American culture—from broadcasting and Hollywood to the novel and the universities—and it influenced those who grew up among the subaltern classes of US society. The most important legacy of the Popular Front may have been this culture. Even critics saw its power: “The Popular Front was not merely a political tactic,” Irving Howe and Lewis Coser wrote, “it was also, and in the United States even more importantly, a kind of culture. . . . The phenomenon of mass culture is pervasive in modern industrial society, but there can be little doubt that at least part of its contemporary American flavor is a heritage of the Popular Front.” The reasons for the Popular Front “flavor” of US mass culture lie in another central social transformation of modernity, the rise of what C. Wright Mills called the “cultural apparatus.”⁷³

3. The Cultural Apparatus

The “cultural apparatus,” the radical social theorist C. Wright Mills wrote in 1959, as the age of the CIO was coming to an end, “is composed of all the organizations and *milieux* in which artistic, intellectual and scientific work goes on, and of the means by which such work is made available to circles, publics, and masses. In the cultural apparatus art, science, and learning, entertainment, malarkey and information are produced and distributed.” “It contains an elaborate set of institutions,” he continued, “schools and theaters, newspapers and census bureaus, studios, laboratories, museums, little magazines, radio networks. It contains truly fabulous agencies of exact information and of trivial distraction, exciting objects, lazy escapes, strident advice.” The development of this cultural apparatus was one of the central aspects of Fordism and modernism. Not only did the Taylorism of modernity accentuate the division between design and execution, mental and manual labor, but it created entire industries and classes built on “mental labor” and the appropriation of the skills of the craftworker. The rise of the great corporate and university research laboratories and the professionalization of engineering and science are of course the most direct instances of capitalist “mental labor.” But the mental labor and performing skills of the arts were also appropriated and reorganized in the first half of the twentieth century. This took two principal forms: a culture industry of leisure and entertainment built on the new technologies of motion pictures, recorded sound, and broadcast-

ing; and a state cultural bureaucracy collecting, subsidizing, and distributing arts, information, and education through a variety of schools and agencies.⁷⁴

The CIO working class—the plebeian communities of second-generation ethnic workers—became the new mass audience for the popular arts and entertainment, and the source of the new mass labor force that staffed the studios and agencies of these cultural industries and state institutions. The new left of 1934 was in many ways the child of these cultural apparatuses, and it left its mark—the Popular Front “flavor” of US mass culture—on them. In this section, I will briefly look at the rise of the culture industries and the state cultural institutions, and then consider the meaning of their mass audience and mass labor force.

One of the most striking changes in American life between the Paterson pageant of 1913 and *Waiting for Lefty* in 1935, between the bohemian left of the *Masses* and the communist left of the *New Masses*, was the growth and maturity of the culture industries. Those two decades had witnessed the emergence of narrative feature films (generally dated from 1915’s *Birth of a Nation*) and the Hollywood studio system that manufactured them. They had seen the invention of broadcasting, the unprecedented provision of free mass entertainment in the home, paid for by incessant advertising, a form that was entirely unexpected by the inventors and developers of radio communication and that would come to dominate television communication as well. The development of sound recording had put popular musics not only on the radio but in the home and on the local jukebox, transforming an industry that had been based on the sale of sheet music into one based on the sale of 78s. The tabloid, the weekly newsmagazine, and the newsreel transformed mass journalism, with Henry Luce’s empire—the weekly national newsmagazine *Time*, the photojournalism of *Life*, and the radio and film newsreels *The March of Time*—leading the way. Popular fiction came to be dominated by the symbiotic relation between the pulp magazines and radio serials and soap operas. And mass spectator sports, led by the baseball reinvented by Babe Ruth and housed in the new urban ballparks of steel and concrete (Yankee Stadium was “the house that Ruth built”), became a “national pastime.”

Perhaps the earliest attempt to deal with these new popular arts appeared a quarter of a century before Mills’s exploration of the cultural apparatus: Gilbert Seldes’s pathbreaking book of 1924, *The Seven Lively Arts*. Seldes’s book, with its impassioned claim that Charlie Chaplin and George Herriman, the creator of the comic strip *Krazy Kat*, were the only great American artists of the day, was a manifesto of the young modernist intellectuals who used and celebrated the popular cultures of the early decades of the twentieth century, including comic strips, jazz, vaudeville, newspaper humor, and the movies, particularly slapstick comedy, as

weapons against the genteel tradition. But Seldes's book is also generally taken as the first in what is now a long line of treatises participating in the intellectual debate about American popular culture, and as such it marks the moment when mass-produced entertainments assume a central place in considerations of "civilization in the United States."

Why did mass-produced entertainments assume this new importance? Before the epoch of Fordism and modernism, the popular arts were generally ignored by the "educated classes," the "cultured classes," the "leisure class," the various parts of the American bourgeoisie. The popular arts—dime novels, melodramas and vaudeville acts, blues singers and string bands, traveling circuses, minstrel shows, and tent shows, as well as the foreign-language cultures of immigrant neighborhoods—inhabited a different universe from the budding metropolitan high culture—"legitimate" theater, symphony orchestras, universities, art museums, the publishers and magazines like Charles Scribners and the *Atlantic Monthly* that published the novels and stories of Howells, James, and Wharton. The only times the "high" culture concerned itself with the "low" were when reformers of various sorts attempted to censor, police, or uplift the "vulgar" and "immoral" entertainments of the people. It is telling that the title of one of the earliest accounts of American popular culture by an intellectual was *Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life* (1880); this book by the Rev. Jonathan Baxter Harrison had been originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

But this situation changed in the early part of the twentieth century when the production of cultural entertainments was industrialized and cheap cultural artifacts were mass-produced and distributed. There had been precedents, of course: the book itself is one of the earliest mass-produced commodities. The technological transformations in printing in the early nineteenth century together with the transportation revolution of steam, railroads, and canals had created the cheap nickel and dime novels and penny newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s; chromolithography and photography brought cheap visual images into homes across the country. Nevertheless, books and newspapers always had a hidden cost: the years of labor that it takes to learn to read, for without literacy, books are a relatively inert commodity. Here the world of modernism marked a watershed: the inventions of motion pictures, sound recording, and radio broadcasting all made relatively direct appeals to sight and hearing and could be easily decoded. Moreover, the hardware and software of these new devices could be mass-produced and sold relatively cheaply.⁷⁵

The marketing of motion picture projectors in 1896 gave birth to the nickelodeon, a storefront theater, popular in immigrant, working-class neighborhoods, that ran continuous shows combining live entertainments—comedy acts, jugglers, illustrated lectures—with short silent films

featuring skits, slapstick, special events, and natural wonders. By the mid 1910s, the beginning of the modern film industry was taking shape, based on the studio production of feature-length fiction films, marketed by a star system, and exhibited through nationwide theater chains. By 1937, movies accounted for three-quarters of America's dollars spent on leisure, and the country's leading writers, actors, musicians, composers, and designers were finding their way to Hollywood. The movies centralized and homogenized US culture; five firms—Paramount, Loew's MGM, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, and RKO—dominated the industry, owning production studios in California, worldwide distribution networks, and national chains of theaters.⁷⁶

The results of sound recording were somewhat different, however. Music "became a thing" in 1877, and, though Edison meant his invention for business uses, by the turn of the century the phonograph was being sold as a household appliance. By the 1910s, the popular music industry began to change as sales of sheet music plummeted and sales of records and phonographs skyrocketed; popular songs became shorter to fit the three-minute playing time of records, but they grew more complex musically. The dance musics of the 1910s, set to the rhythms of ragtime and the tango, were difficult to play on the piano but easy to play on the phonograph. By the early 1920s, recording companies began to record and market regional, ethnic, and racial musics; as a result, the phonograph, together with the relatively low capital requirements of making records, not only helped keep traditional cultures alive and developing but provided the foundation for a new urban music. From the combination of these recorded racial and ethnic musics and a popular songwriting aimed at an audience of record players rather than piano players emerged modern American vernacular musics. When Louis Armstrong first recorded a Tin Pan Alley song in 1928, "I Must Have That Man," he embodied the dialectic that was to dominate American music for a generation, a dialectic between the blues and the Tin Pan Alley "standard," between the neighboring urban communities of working-class African Americans and working-class Jews, Italians, and Poles, between the blues scales of African American music, the *frigish* scales of Yiddish popular music, and the pentatonic scales of Eastern European folk musics.⁷⁷

The depression rocked the music industry: the phonograph had remained expensive throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and record sales crashed from 100 million in 1927 to 6 million in 1932. By the time sales recovered in the late 1930s, three major record companies dominated the industry: RCA Victor, Decca, and Columbia/ARC (American Record Company). The music industry had found new forms in the rise of the public phonograph, the jukebox (which took 60 percent of record sales in 1939), in the coming of sound to motion pictures, and in the emergence

of radio broadcasting with its constant flow of music. Radio broadcasting had begun in the wake of the radio fad of 1922 as a way of encouraging the sales of radio receivers, but it quickly developed into a national system of networks with corporate sponsors in control of programming. The National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) made its debut as a national network in 1926, broadcasting on 26 stations to 12 million people; in 1929, *Amos 'n' Andy*, a situation comedy built on the foundations of the black-face minstrel show, became broadcasting's *Birth of a Nation*, pioneering the narrative form that would dominate radio and television. By the early 1930s, an estimated 40 million people—1 in 3 Americans—listened to *Amos 'n' Andy*; and in its wake advertising agencies came to serve as the Hollywood studios of the airwaves, producing the situation comedies, adventure serials, and soap operas that NBC "Blue," NBC "Red," and CBS broadcast.⁷⁸

The emergence of this new commercial culture had several major consequences, all of which made the "popular arts" the new center of American culture. First, the capitalist culture industries, unlike the cultural institutions of the nineteenth century, were built on profit, not taste. Though many compromises with the forces of good taste were made in order to stay profitable—one thinks of the self-censorship codes in Hollywood, the highbrow "sustaining" radio programs, and the separate "luxury" markets of higher-priced goods—nevertheless the overall tendency of the culture industries was to make what sold, to build on popular taste. As a result, many more people experienced various kinds of cultural entertainments in contexts far from the original venues. Forms which had had a local base traveled far and wide; the "classics," once owned and preserved by the cultured and leisured classes, were now cheaply available, and the working-class entertainments of black and ethnic neighborhoods were available to the educated classes. Much of the "cultural front," as we shall see, was built on this "popularization" of high culture and diffusion of "proletarian" and "folk" culture.

Second, because of the size of the mass audiences and the capital invested in production, the popular arts achieved a technical accomplishment and brilliance that had never before been possible. This is not an absolute rule by any means: for one thing, for all their poverty of resources, traditional folk arts can and have reached extraordinary levels of accomplishment. Moreover, as the critics of the culture industry have long argued, the assembly-line production of mass entertainment has meant that much of the standardized product that was shipped out had little aesthetic or cultural value. It is clear that the desire to reach the largest audience by avoiding controversy and complexity has produced some materials that deserve the rich vocabulary of derision that has developed to describe them. Nevertheless, the new industries of culture made possible

remarkable achievements that have, for all practical purposes, broken down the line between the high, learned arts and the popular arts, as the work of such figures as Dashiell Hammett, Orson Welles, Duke Ellington, and Billie Holiday demonstrates. As a result, the popular arts no longer seemed a sometimes quaint, sometimes vulgar enclave that could be safely ignored. The state of popular culture was the state of the culture generally, particularly in the United States, which had an overdeveloped set of culture industries and an underdeveloped established high culture: indeed, for Europeans, Americanism was mass culture.

Third, if the new culture industries produced some remarkable works of popular art, the rise of broadcasting also made them an elaborate front for the advertisements of national corporations. "It is inconceivable," Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover said of radio in 1922, "that we should allow so great a possibility for service, for news, for entertainment, for education to be drowned in advertising chatter"; nevertheless, within a few years, radio broadcasting adopted the mixture of advertising and programming that the "magazine revolution" of the 1890s had pioneered. The programs, like the magazine's features, were a way of attracting an audience to the advertisements: they were, in a way, advertisements for the advertisements. The radio programs of the 1930s and 1940s were not only sponsored by advertisers, but were produced by advertising agencies, and their success or failure was tracked by the radio rating services pioneered by Archibald Crossley in 1930.

Thus, the growing advertising industry was the backbone of the new culture industries, attracting the investments of other industrial sectors in culture and entertainment. The culture industries took the lead in developing a new capitalist political agenda in the years following the crash of 1929. In some cases, their actions were ordinary power politics, as when the Hollywood studios organized an extraordinary campaign to defeat Upton Sinclair's EPIC campaign in 1934. But in other cases, culture industry executives realized the consequences of the crisis and attempted to rebuild a hegemonic historical bloc. In 1935, Bruce Barton, the head of Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne (BBDO), a leading advertising agency handling the accounts of General Motors and General Electric, told the National Association of Manufacturers that industry needed a "new vocabulary" to win the hearts and minds of Americans: "business must regain its rightful position of social and political leadership lost to the New Deal." Barton's advice was heeded by his friend Henry Luce, who had invented modern news coverage with his magazines *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*, and his radio and film newsreels, the *March of Time*. In 1941, Luce published an influential manifesto in *Life* entitled "The American Century." In the years that followed, Luce's brief essay and its title became a kind of shorthand for corporate America's vision of the world that was to emerge from the

war, a world dominated by American commercial entertainments: "American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products, are in fact the only things that every community in the world from Zanzibar to Hamburg, recognizes in common." Luce's manifesto is only the most striking example of the new corporate aesthetic, embodied in the work of advertising agencies and industrial designers.⁷⁹

For other culture industry leaders, however, the solution lay in the New Deal itself: the new historical bloc that Roosevelt assembled in 1936 depended on an important group of internationalist and capital-intensive corporations who dominated the major American foundations and had close ties to the cultural apparatus. This corporate liberalism was secured, the historian Thomas Ferguson argues, "by the spread of liberal Protestantism; by a newspaper stratification that brought the free-trade organ of international finance, the *New York Times*, to the top; by the growth of capital-intensive network radio in the dominant Eastern, internationally-oriented environment; and by the rise of the major news magazines." Media corporations—newspapers, film and magazine companies—were significantly more likely to support Roosevelt than other industries: Warner Brothers, for example, famously became the "New Deal" studio.⁸⁰

If the commercial cultural industries developed a new self-consciousness in the years after the crash, the public cultural apparatus was virtually invented by the New Deal. The two decades after *Waiting for Lefty* saw an unprecedented involvement of the federal government in culture. The state sponsorship of writers, artists, theaters, and musicians that began in the spring of 1935 under the Works Progress Administration as relief from the economic crisis became an attempt to redefine American culture and to create a "cultural democracy" by establishing a bureaucracy that would provide "culture" for the people. Though the specific WPA cultural "projects" were disbanded during the war, their goals and personnel were shifted first into the wartime propaganda agencies and then into the permanent "arts projects," the vastly expanded post-war university systems, which were to reshape dramatically intellectual and artistic life in the United States. Thus, federal interventions in culture took three principal forms: direct funding of the arts in the relief apparatus of the depression; development of international cultural exchange and diplomacy out of the wartime propaganda agencies; and state sponsorship of higher education.

The first of these, the federal relief projects for artists, remains a central icon of the New Deal: as *Fortune* magazine put it in 1937, "whatever else may be said of the Government's flyer in art, one statement is incontrovertible. It has produced, one way or another, a greater human response than anything the government has done in generations." After a couple of initial efforts at white-collar relief under the Civil Works Administration (notably the Public Works of Art Project [PWAP] in the winter of 1933–34), the

Works Progress Administration (WPA), a national employment program established in the spring of 1935, organized relief for artists under Federal Project Number One, including art (directed by Holger Cahill), music (directed by Nikolai Sokoloff), drama (directed by Hallie Flanagan), writers (directed by Henry Alsberg), and, somewhat later, historical records.⁸¹

The cultural projects ran orchestras, theaters, and community art centers, and produced thousands of public murals and radio programs, over eight hundred plays, and the famous *American Guide* series of tour books. For the most part, the cultural work of the projects was closely monitored, particularly the theater productions and public murals. The writers were generally not allowed to pursue their own work but were hired to write for particular projects, like the guidebooks. As Roosevelt himself said, "I can't have a lot of young enthusiasts painting Lenin's head on the Justice Building." Nevertheless, the WPA arts projects were a constant subject of controversy: individual murals and theater productions provoked political battles, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, chaired by Martin Dies, launched an investigation of Federal One in August 1938 that led to the abolition of the Federal Theatre Project and the transfer of the other projects to the states in 1939. By the spring of 1942, all cultural activities that did not relate to the war effort were eliminated.⁸²

Though the WPA arts projects did not prove to be a model for future government support for the arts, they were a vanishing mediator, leaving an indelible imprint on the modern cultural apparatus. Their demise meant that the federal government would not compete with the culture industries in providing popular entertainment. No state broadcasting system like the BBC emerged from the New Deal, no state film studio, no state recording company. Moreover, despite their genuine aesthetic and popular successes, the productions of the WPA arts projects did not finally compete with the culture industries: the easel paintings did not have the impact of *Life's* photographs; the murals did not reclaim the landscape from the omnipresent billboard; the federal theaters did not reverse live theater's losses to Hollywood; neither the federal symphonies nor the folk-music collections displaced the swing of the big bands; and the *American Guides* faded in the face of the 25-cent Pocket Books.

Nonetheless, the WPA arts projects left their mark on the development of a semipublic institutional culture of foundations, museums, and universities in the years after the war. The first link was with the wartime propaganda agencies that had emerged from the New Deal state: the State Department's Division of Cultural Relations was formed in June 1938 to handle cultural exchanges with Latin America; it was joined by the CIAA (Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs) under Nelson Rockefeller in

August 1940. The Coordinator of Information, founded in July 1941, gave way to the Office of War Information and the Office of Strategic Services in June 1942. With the elimination of the WPA projects during the Second World War, many arts projects participants moved into the war information agencies. Under Robert Sherwood, the OWI brought figures like John Houseman, who had been a director of two Federal Theatre units in New York, to head the government's radio broadcast, "Voice of America." Malcolm Cowley, who was recruited into the Office of Facts and Figures, wrote to his friend Kenneth Burke that "you can get a vague picture of a government agency by imagining the business of General Motors being run by the faculty of . . . Columbia." Indeed, the battles within the New Deal state apparatus continued through the war years, as Sherwood's people were eventually forced out of the OWI. Nevertheless, the post-war years saw the continuation and expansion of federal cultural programs, some overt, like the State Department's support of art exhibitions and concert tours, and others covert, like the CIA's funding of the magazine *Encounter*.⁸³

Perhaps the most important federal intervention in culture was the building of the postwar university system, supported by government research and development funds and by the GI Bill of 1944, which financed higher education for 8 million veterans. "From the end of the war and for the next two decades," Daniel Bell writes, "R & D expenditures in America multiplied by 15 times, and the total expenditure on education by six." Colleges and universities, which had been the preserve of an elite, achieved a mass "audience" in the decades after the war, enrolling students from working-class families in large numbers for the first time. If universities were not exactly mass entertainment in the way that film studios were, they nonetheless were a central part of American mass culture.⁸⁴

The specter of these cultural apparatuses of commercial entertainment and state information haunted the activists and intellectuals of the left: from James Rorty's path-breaking 1934 critique of advertising, *Our Master's Voice*, to the 1945 analysis of the "culture industry" by the émigré Marxists of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to C. Wright Mills's unfinished project of the late 1950s, *The Cultural Apparatus*. For many of them, as we shall see, these technologies of communication degraded aesthetic perception and overwhelmed both learned and folk cultures, reducing their audiences to distracted, resigned consumers of escapist fantasy: "Both escape and elopement," Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, "are pre-designed to lead back to the starting point. Pleasure promotes the resignation which it ought to help to forget." For others, however, the dialectic of distraction was itself part of the political struggle. "It is one of the most astonishing things about the modern American film," C.L.R. James wrote in 1950, "that it does not treat of the Great Depression,

the pervading fear of another economic collapse, the birth and development of the union movement, the fear of war, the fundamental social and political issues of the day." "It might seem," he goes on,

that this is deliberate sabotage by those who control the economic life of the country. That is quite false. The industrial magnates, a movie producer so anti-union as De Mille, and great numbers of people in authority would wish nothing better than to employ the finest available talent in order to impose *their* view of the great political and social questions of the day upon the mass. *They dare not do it.* The general public accepts, or to be more precise, appears to accept the general political ideas, standards, social ethics, etc., of the society which is the natural framework of the films as they are produced today. Whenever possible a piece of direct propaganda is injected, but the C.I.O., the great strikes, capital and labor, war and peace, these are left out by mutual understanding, a sort of armed neutrality.⁸⁵

The other side of this "armed neutrality" of mass entertainment was its adoption of popular accents. Since the heart of the new mass audience was the urban working class, living and working in the multi-racial, multi-ethnic metropolises of modernism, the songs and stories, the hacks and stars, of the cultural apparatus often assumed the accents of the urban streets and tenements. Many of the culture industries grew out of the commercial amusements of the cities, the world of vaudeville theaters, nightclubs and dance halls, amusement parks like Coney Island, baseball parks, penny arcades. The early moving pictures and phonographs were not in the home but were part of the "automatic amusement machines" at arcades. In the long run, of course, the culture industries were to break the tie between the city and culture; movies, records, and broadcasting did not need the city's audience and did not want the city's labor-intensive live performances, for which the actors, musicians, and stage hands had to be paid every night. When the film industry moved to Hollywood to find sunshine and a non-union labor force, it created another of the mythical places—Tin Pan Alley, Motown, Madison Avenue, the Super Bowl—where mass entertainments are fabricated and then reproduced in every Main Street and Middletown. Nevertheless, the early entrepreneurs of leisure often had experience in the less respectable urban amusements and recruited performers and technicians from the world of vaudeville, thus giving a plebeian, ethnic accent to mass entertainment.⁸⁶

As a result, the cultural apparatus became a contested terrain between the Popular Front and the Advertising Front, as working-class styles, stars, and characters emerged alongside the sales plug. Indeed, as Elizabeth Cohen argues, young workers "used mass culture to create a second-generation ethnic working-class culture that preserved the boundaries between themselves and others. That they felt alienated from their parents'

world did not necessarily mean that they forsook it for a nonethnic, middle-class one." Summarizing the place of radio broadcasting, filmgoing, and chain stores in working-class neighborhoods, she argues that

contrary to the usual assumption that mass culture was depoliticizing, the experience of industrial workers in the 1930s suggests that even as workers shared more in national commercial culture, integration enabled them to mount more effective political action, specifically to overcome the cultural fragmentation that had hindered them earlier. . . . At a time when they were all suffering from the depression and searching for collective solutions, talking about a boxing match on the radio or the latest bargain at the A&P helped workers to maintain their group identity. Ironically, the broader dissemination of commercial culture that accompanied its consolidation in the 1930s may have done more to create an integrated working-class culture than a classless American one.

Rather than simply eroding earlier working-class cultures, mass consumer culture became a common ground of a new working-class culture.⁸⁷

If the modern cultural apparatus created a new mass audience, it also required a new labor force, a huge number of "cultural workmen," as Mills called them. Not only was it now possible to make a living as a popular artist, writing, composing, performing, designing, but these artists were not live performers for local audiences: they were laborers in large industrial studios. Here again the WPA arts projects were a crucial mediator; they had a labor force of 30–40,000 throughout the late 1930s, and they proved to be a way-station for the young plebeian artists and intellectuals of ethnic working-class backgrounds who would go on to careers in the federal bureaucracies, the culture industries, and the universities. As Harold Rosenberg noted in his introduction to a collection of the "spare time work" by WPA writers and artists, these young artists shared less an "esthetic unity" than a "common social experience": "the present selection," he wrote, "differs from earlier little magazine issues in that it came into being not as the result of a theoretical or esthetic grouping, but through an economic predicament. But if the employment of all its contributors on Federal Project No. 1 does not confer upon them an esthetic unity, it does immerse them in a common social experience." Later, Rosenberg argued that the influence of the arts projects lay less in their productions than in the ways they contributed to the professionalization of the arts.⁸⁸

As early as 1937, Edward Lindeman had suggested that federal support allowed artists to say "farewell to bohemia," and as the post-war universities increasingly became a major center of American cultural life, employing intellectuals, sponsoring theaters and orchestras, and providing a place where writers, artists, and musicians worked "in residence," they further displaced urban bohemia, professionalizing and bureaucratizing the arts.

The culture industries also professionalized and bureaucratized the arts; Hollywood, radio, and the illustrated magazine were magnets for writers, actors, composers, photographers, and painters. Moreover, those artists who were not employed by the new mass media found themselves competing with them. The older notions of the bohemian artist and freelance intellectual were no longer adequate to the new armies of white-collar and professional workers in the cultural bureaucracies that Daniel Bell named the "cultural mass"—"those persons in the knowledge and communications industries who, with their families, would number several million persons."⁸⁹

Occupational statistics are notoriously inexact, but they offer a sense of the shift. From 1920 to 1950, the labor force grew by 40 percent, from 42 million to 59 million. In the same years, the number of teachers grew by 53 percent (from 752,000 to 1,149,000) and the number of photographers by 93 percent (from 29,000 to 56,000). A number of groups more than doubled: artists and art teachers increased by 137 percent (from 35,000 to 83,000); editors and reporters by 138 percent (from 39,000 to 93,000); athletes, dancers, and entertainers by 140 percent (from 48,000 to 115,000); and authors by 143 percent (from 7,000 to 17,000). Two categories almost quadrupled: librarians grew by 280 percent (from 15,000 to 57,000) and college professors by 285 percent (from 33,000 to 127,000). Moreover, a category of miscellaneous intellectuals, including social scientists, labor-relations workers, and natural scientists, multiplied by fifteen (from 20,000 to 302,000). Only one group of cultural workers failed to keep pace with the overall labor force: musicians and music teachers, challenged by the rise of recorded music, grew by only 28 percent (from 130,000 to 166,000), though they remained the largest single group of artists. All in all, the "cultural mass" of 1950 was roughly 2 million people.⁹⁰

For the most part, work in the cultural trades became increasingly standardized during these years; as C. Wright Mills wrote, "mass culture . . . rests on the ascendancy of the commercial distributor" who hires and manages a "stable of cultural workmen." "The search goes on for 'fresh ideas,' for exciting notions, for more luring models; in brief: for the innovator. But in the meantime, back at the studio, the laboratory, the research bureau, the writer's factory—the distributor manages many producers who become the rank-and-file workmen of the commercially established cultural apparatus." Nevertheless, one of the remarkable aspects of the cultural apparatus during these years is that the "rank-and-file workmen" began to organize themselves into culture industry unions and guilds. There were some long-standing AFL unions, including the American Federation of Musicians, Actors' Equity, and the IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees). But the revival of the labor movement after 1934 saw the emergence of the new Hollywood

unions—the Screen Actors, Screen Directors, Screen Cartoonists, and Screen Writers' Guilds—the broadcasting unions including the Radio Writers' Guild, an Artists Union (which became United American Artists, Local 60 of UOPWA-CIO), and the CIO's Newspaper Guild, led by Heywood Broun.⁹¹

The new left of 1934 was entangled in this apparatus, this industrial form of modern mental labor, in three ways. First, the young radicals and communists were themselves the mass audience of the culture industries, having grown up with the movies, jazz, and the cheap amusements of the modernist metropolis. Second, as we shall see, they went to work in the culture industries, writing copy for Luce's publishing empire and the advertising agencies, making movies in the Hollywood studios, and producing records in the music industry. They found relief work in the WPA projects; enlisted in the wartime propaganda agencies; and were hired as teachers and artists in the post-war universities. They were often catalysts in organizing the culture industry unions, and they were the targets of the periodic legislative red scares. Finally, these same mental workers offered a powerful analysis of these new "mass communications" and the "new class" that operated them. Beginning with the League of Professionals' 1932 manifesto "Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists, and Other Professional Workers of America," and continuing through C. Wright Mills's 1959 anatomy of the "cultural apparatus," the new left of 1934 was obsessed with the meaning of the economic changes in culture itself: as I will suggest below, the term "cultural front" itself is an attempt to name that new situation.

The cultural front is thus the terrain where the Popular Front social movement met the cultural apparatus during the age of the CIO. From that conflict and conjuncture came the Popular Front "flavor" of American mass culture, what I will call the laboring of American culture.

PART II

Anatomy of the Cultural Front

Every revolutionary class must wage war on the cultural front.

Lewis Corey, *The Decline of American Capitalism*, 1934

The most important problem to discuss in this paragraph is this: whether the philosophy of praxis excludes ethico-political history, whether it fails to recognize the reality of a moment of hegemony, treats moral and cultural leadership as unimportant and really judges superstructural facts as "appearances." One can say that not only does the philosophy of praxis not exclude ethico-political history but that, indeed, in its most recent stage of development, it consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and to the "accrediting" of the cultural fact, of cultural activity, of a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones.

Antonio Gramsci