The Cultural Front

The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

"Do not ask me to write of the strike and the terror," the young Tillie Lerner (later Olsen) wrote of San Francisco's General Strike in 1934. "I am on a battlefield, and the increasing stench and smoke sting the eyes so it is impossible to turn them back into the past. [. . .] The rest, the General Strike, the terror, arrests and jail, the songs in the night, must be written some other time, must be written later. . . . But there is so much happening now. . . ." The long strike of longshoremen for union recognition in the spring of 1934 had culminated in the violent attempt by shipowners to reopen San Francisco's docks on 5 July, the "Bloody Thursday" during which two workers were killed, thirty were treated for bullet wounds, and many more were clubbed, gassed, and stoned. The general strike that shut down San Francisco the following week marked the birth of a new social movement—the Popular Front—out of the depths of the depression.[1]

"The city became a camp, a battlefield," Lerner wrote, "the screams of ambulances sent the day reeling, class lines fell sharply—everywhere, on streetcars, on corners, in stores, people talked, cursing, stirred with something strange in their breasts, incomprehensible, shaken with fury at the police, the papers, the shipowners . . . going down to the waterfront, not curious spectators, but to stand there, watching, silent, trying to read the lesson the moving bodies underneath were writing, trying to grope to the meaning of it all." Lerner herself was trying to read the lesson the moving bodies were writing, but she was also one of those moving bodies.

The daughter of Russian immigrants, she had grown up in working-class Omaha and had never completed high school. After joining the Young Communist League at the age of eighteen, she moved to California and became active in the 1934 waterfront struggles; her work for the *Waterfront Worker* led to her arrest for vagrancy. Her arrest and imprisonment drew national attention because she had published a remarkable short story

about a mining camp, "The Iron Throat," in the proletarian literary magazine, *Partisan Review.* Robert Cantwell told her story in the *New Republic* as an example of "The Literary Life in California," and the following week the *New Republic* carried her own account of the arrest, "Thousand-Dollar Vagrant." But Lerner's promise to write about "the rest" was not kept until forty years later when her "lost" novel, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (1974), was reconstructed from old manuscripts, emerging as the lyric masterpiece of the Popular Front. Opening with her mining-camp tale, "The Iron Throat," the novel ends amidst stench and smoke when a steam pipe explodes in a packinghouse, a figure for "the fists of strike" and "the pickax of revolution."[2]

If 1929 became a symbol of despair and ruin, an emblem of the crash of an economy and a way of life, 1934 stands as one of the lyric years in American history. Along with 1848, 1886, and 1968, 1934 is an emblem of insurgency, upheaval, and hope. A new militancy and solidarity among American working people appeared as the battles of San Francisco's longshoremen, Minneapolis's teamsters, and Toledo's auto-parts workers won the allegiance of citizens and neighbors. General strikes brought each city to a halt, figuring, however briefly, a cooperative commonwealth.

In September 1934, a national textile strike became the largest strike in a single industry in American history, involving 400,000 workers from Maine to Alabama. Strikes in California's factories in the fields were the largest agricultural strikes in American history. These strikes seared the imaginations of young writers and artists. "I have never been in a strike before," Meridel Le Sueur wrote of the Minneapolis General Strike. "I felt my feet join in that strange shuffle of thousands of bodies moving with direction, of thousands of feet, and my own breath. As if an electric charge had passed through me, my hair stood on end. I was marching." "The strike taught me that I was definitely a part of the labor movement," the Filipino poet Carlos Bulosan later wrote of a lettuce strike in Lompoc. "From this day onward my life became one long conspiracy . . . I was so intensely fired by this dream of a better America that I had completely forgotten myself." A year later, in the fall of 1935, the leader of the United Mine Workers, John L. Lewis, responded to the labor uprisings by forming the CIO (Committee for, later Congress of, Industrial Organizations). The next two decades were the age of the CIO.[3]

At the same time, a new radical culture was taking shape. On 6 January 1935, the audience at New York's Civic Repertory Theatre, 1,400 strong, chanted "Strike! Strike!" at the end of the first performance of *Waiting for Lefty.* An unknown one-act play about a taxi strike by an unknown playwright, performed by Group Theatre actors to benefit the left-wing magazine *New Theatre, Waiting for Lefty* captured the imagination of this movement; theater groups across the country produced it. By the end of the year, *Waiting for Lefty* was "the most widely performed play in America—and the most widely banned." America, it seemed, was waiting for lefty.[4]

The heart of this cultural front was a new generation of plebeian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working-class neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis. They were the second generation of the second wave of immigration: ethnic Italians, Jews, Poles, Mexicans, Serbians, Croatians, Slovaks, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos along with African Americans who had migrated north. The children of public education, they were caught between the memories and stories of their parents and the realities of urban streets and shops. Some joined the small and militant Young Communist League; others joined the tiny revolutionary parties that had split from the Communists; many belonged to no political group but simply adopted the name: they were all "communists." All three general strikes had been led by these young communists: in San Francisco by members of the Communist Party like Lerner herself; in Minneapolis by the Trotskyists of the Communist League of America; and in Toledo by A. J. Muste's American Workers Party. The artists and writers among them formed proletarian literary clubs, workers theaters, camera clubs, film and photo leagues, composers collectives, Red dance troupes, and revolutionary choruses: the proletarian avant-garde of the depression. Nineteen thirty-four saw a flowering of little magazines that published proletarian stories, poems, songs, and cartoons: *Blast, Anvil, Dynamo, Partisan Review, Left Front.* In October 1935, an anthology entitled *Proletarian Literature in the United States* gathered together the stories, poems, plays, reportage, and criticism of this avant-garde: it included Lerner's "The Iron Throat" as well as *Waiting for Lefty.*

These young plebeian artists found allies among the older generation of American modernists drawn to the Popular Front. In March 1935, *Waiting for Lefty* was followed by *Panic,* an agitprop verse drama written by Archibald MacLeish, starring a nineteen-year-old Orson Welles playing the ruined capitalist McGafferty. MacLeish, a well-known poet, was only one of the writers and artists of the modernist generation who turned to the left. John Dos Passos, in the midst of writing his radical trilogy, *U.S.A.,* led a delegation of writers to investigate the repression of miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. Langston Hughes wrote a play and poems about the Scottsboro Nine, and Duke Ellington performed at Scottsboro benefits. Malcolm Cowley's influential chronicle of the moderns, *Exile's Return* (1934), ended by calling on artists to "take the workers' side" in the class struggle. "So far as I can see," Kenneth Burke wrote in *Permanence and Change* (1935), "the only coherent and organized movement making for the subjection of the technological genius to humane ends is that of Communism, by whatever name it may finally prevail." In 1932, a number of these modernist intellectuals, including Dos Passos, Cowley, Hughes,

Edmund Wilson, and Lincoln Steffens, had issued a manifesto, *Culture and the Crisis*, announcing their support for the Communist Party candidates "in the interests of a truly human society in which all forms of exploitation have been abolished; in behalf of a new cultural renaissance."[5]

They also found allies among the anti-fascist émigrés fleeing Hitler. Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler, and Kurt Weill all first came to the United States in 1935, transplanting Weimar's radical music and theatre to New York. Hollywood was infused with the talents of German film. The muralists of the Mexican revolution—José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—painted murals in the United States and exercised a powerful political and artistic influence: the whitewashing of Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural was a major political controversy in 1933. All three groups—the young plebeians, the radical moderns, and the anti-fascist émigrés—came together in the cultural front, the extraordinary flowering of arts, entertainment, and thought based on the broad social movement that came to be known as the Popular Front.

At the end of the century, what is left? For most critics and historians of American culture, not much. "To this day," one of our finest historians has written, "when I hear the words Pop Front I think of atrocious art." The post-war Red scare and anti-communist purge combined with the Cold War to eradicate much of the radical culture of the Popular Front. The "thirties" became an icon, the brief moment when "politics" captured the arts, when writers went left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians, and photographers were "social-minded." The left turn of the depression is usually seen as a detour if not a wrong turn. But were the 1930s merely a "Red decade" or were they, as Michael Gold claimed, a "second American Renaissance"? In the pages that follow, I hope to persuade you that the cultural front reshaped American culture. Just as the radical movements of abolition, utopian socialism, and women's rights sparked the antebellum American Renaissance, so the communisms of the depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture, what I will call the *laboring* of American culture.[6]

What is the laboring of American culture? What does it mean to labor a culture? In this book, I use the phrase to sum up a number of interrelated arguments, and, at the risk of belaboring it, I will outline those meanings and those arguments. First, the laboring of American culture refers to the pervasive use of "labor" and its synonyms in the rhetoric of the period. It includes the common reference to the "labor movement" and a "labor party," as well as the use of the term "proletarian" by the young militants in the early days of the movement. Together with the various forms of "work," "industry," and "toil," these were key words in the vocabulary of

the cultural front: the language itself was "labored." Second, it refers to what a more technical usage would call the "proletarianization" of American culture, the increased influence on and participation of working-class Americans in the world of culture and the arts. As I shall argue, this was largely the result of a remarkable expansion of what is usually called mass culture: on the one hand, secondary and higher education; and on the other, the industries of entertainment and amusement. In this sense, there was a laboring of American culture as children from working-class families grew up to become artists in the culture industries, and American workers became the primary audience for those industries.

Third, the laboring of American culture refers to the new visibility of the labor of cultural production. Culture had become an industry in the early twentieth century, and artists, musicians, and writers were laborers in that industry. As a result, one of the central stories of the cultural front is the organization of unions by these workers, including screenwriters, cartoonists, journalists, and teachers. Fourth, the phrase reminds us that the culture and politics of the Popular Front were not simply New Deal liberalism and populism. It was a social democratic culture, a culture of "industrial democracy" and "industrial unionism." In England, the culture and politics of social democracy and the post-World War II Labour Party is often called "labourism"; the Popular Front was in this sense "laborist," and fought for the laboring—the social democratization—of American culture.

Finally, the laboring of American culture connotes a birthing of a new American culture, a second American Renaissance. But it was also a laboring in that this birth was painstaking and difficult. This was neither a revolution nor a coup d'état; it was not even a transformation. To labor is to plod, to be hampered, to pitch and roll in a storm. In all these senses, the cultural front was a laboring, an incomplete and unfinished struggle to rework American culture, with hesitations, pauses, defeats, and failures.

This book is a history of the cultural front and an interpretation of the artistic and intellectual formations it fostered. I begin with the question that has long dominated the cultural history of the depression: Why did the left have a powerful, indeed an unprecedented, impact on US culture in the 1930s? For most critics and historians, the answer is embodied in the image of the "fellow traveler," the individual artist or intellectual attracted to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union in the face of a collapsing economy and a rising fascism. The history of the "commitment" of these "fellow travelers" is commonly told as a morality tale of seduction and betrayal, utopian dreams and Cold War disenchantment. However, the narrative of the "fellow traveler" is misleading and does not capture the full significance of the cultural front. For the cultural front was not simply the product of individual political commitment: it was, I will argue

in part one, the result of the encounter between a powerful democratic social movement—the Popular Front—and the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education.

The broad social movement known as the Popular Front was the ground on which the workers theaters, proletarian literary magazines, and film industry unions stood: it was, I will argue, a radical social-democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the industrial unionism of the CIO. The Popular Front emerged out of the crisis of 1929, and it remained the central popular democratic movement over the following three decades, the years I will call the age of the CIO. Here I take issue with most accounts of the Popular Front, sympathetic or hostile, which have seen it through a core-periphery model, in which the core was the Communist Party and the periphery was the surrounding circles of "fellow travelers" with greater or lesser degrees of affiliation to the Party. This view leads to a remarkably inadequate understanding of the depth and breadth of the social movement, as well as a disproportionate emphasis on central Party leaders, an over-reading of the significance of pronouncements in Communist Party journals, and, in some cases, a search for the Moscow gold that kept it all running.

In cultural studies, this has often led to a fetishization of Party membership, and an overemphasis on the narrative of affiliation and disaffiliation. However, Party membership was not that central; many people passed through the Party at different times, and the large majority of Popular Front radicals were never members. Indeed, many figures thought of themselves as generic "communists," using the term with a small *c*, the way earlier and later generations thought of themselves as generic "socialists," "feminists," or "radicals." "I cannot help calling myself a communist," Lewis Mumford wrote to Van Wyck Brooks, "for that points to the fundamental demand." "Most of us down here consider ourselves pretty good communists, you know," the secretary of the Arkansas labor school, Commonwealth College, wrote to Jack Conroy, "but we can't work with the party. It's the old question of tactics again." As Kenneth Burke wrote to Malcolm Cowley, "my book will have the communist objectives, and the communist tenor, but the approach will be the approach that seems significant to me."[7]

Thus, in part one, "The Left and American Culture," I sketch an alternative view of the Popular Front, seeing it as a historical bloc: I begin with its base in the industrial unions of the CIO, then move to its political superstructures, and finally turn to its cultural formations. I then outline the history of the Popular Front, its rise and fall through the age of the CIO. The impact of the Popular Front on American culture was magnified by the rise of what C. Wright Mills was to call the "cultural apparatus." I conclude part one by arguing that this modern cultural apparatus not only

found its audience among the ethnic working classes of the modern metropolis, but recruited its artists and intellectuals from those urban working classes. A generation of plebeian artists and intellectuals came to staff the agencies of the federal government and the studios of the culture industries. With the emergence of the Popular Front social movement, these "hacks" and "stars" of the cultural apparatus became the moving spirits of the cultural front.

Part two, "Anatomy of the Cultural Front," is an overview of the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the cultural front. The cultural front was a common metaphor of the time, combining two meanings of the word "front": the military metaphor designating a place, a site of struggle or battlefront; and the political metaphor designating a group, a coalition with a common purpose. Thus, the "cultural front" referred both to the cultural industries and apparatuses—a "front" or terrain of cultural struggle—and to the alliance of radical artists and intellectuals who made up the "cultural" part of the Popular Front. It is perhaps not surprising that the term often appeared as the title of a newspaper or magazine column, for the column was a place where one spoke out, took a stand, and mobilized an audience. As early as 1932, "The Cultural Front" was the title of a column in the mimeographed *Baltimore John Reed Club Bulletin.* And by 1938 there was a regular column in the glossy photomagazine *Direction*, "the lively, entertaining and crusading magazine of the People's Front in the Arts," entitled "Cultural Front," which listed current performances and exhibitions of interest to the left (Figure 1). Michael Gold, a columnist for the *Daily Worker*, called one of his columns "Notes on the Cultural Front." Even vehement left-wing critics of the Communist Party used the phrase: James Farrell's literary columns in *Socialist Call* and *Partisan Review* were both called "The Cultural Front"; and Dwight Macdonald titled a section of his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, "The Cultural Front."[8]

To understand the cultural front, I will distinguish two notions of the politics of art: "cultural politics," the politics of allegiances and affiliations, and "aesthetic ideologies," the politics of form. The first, cultural politics, is at one level simply the politics of letterheads and petitions, the stances taken by artists and intellectuals, the pledges of allegiance and declarations of dissent. But it is also the politics of the cultural field itself, the history of the institutions and apparatuses in which artists and intellectuals work. For the kinds of political stances artists and intellectuals take depend upon their understanding of the ground on which they work. The notion of the cultural front itself was an attempt to theorize the relation of culture to politics. Chapter two, "Marching on May Day," will explore the ways the cultural front inflected the movement culture of the CIO, the state cultural institutions of the New Deal order, and the studios of the culture industry.[9]

But if these allegiances and affiliations represent the "social consciousness"

of the cultural front, the works produced by the communist artists and intellectuals also bear the traces of a "political unconscious." The cultural front embodied a politics of form, an aesthetic ideology. The novels, plays, films, and musicals written and performed by the radical artists within and without the cultural apparatus used a repertoire of forms and styles, genres and conventions; and the critical controversies and debates that surrounded them established ways of seeing and judging, canons of value. So chapter three, "Ballads for Americans," looks at the popular aesthetics and ideologies that informed the cultural front, their revolutionary symbolisms, ethnic Americanisms, and labor feminisms.[10]

Part three, "Formations of the Cultural Front," takes up what Raymond Williams called "the most central and practical element in cultural analysis: the exploration and specification of distinguishable cultural formations." Cultural formations, he suggested, "are simultaneously artistic forms and social locations." Each of the chapters of part three explores an artistic form that was also a social location: the narrative of the decline and fall of the Lincoln republic in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*; the "literary class war" of the proletarian literature movement; the genre of ghetto or tenement pastorals that came to dominate American literature through the works of novelists like Richard Wright and Tillie Olsen; the migrant narratives of California's factories in the fields composed by Woody Guthrie, Carlos Bulosan, and Ernesto Galarza; the experiments in musical theater represented by Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, the Labor Stage's *Pins and Needles*, and Duke Ellington's *Jump for Joy*; the cabaret blues of Billie Holiday and Josh White; the theater, radio, and film of Orson Welles and his Mercury Theatre; the strikes and cartoons of Disney's radical animators; and the encounter between American culture and socialist theory that reshaped American thought in the works of figures like Kenneth Burke, Carey McWilliams, and Elizabeth Hawes.[11]

Although the Popular Front was defeated by the forces of the "American Century," and the "thirties" seemed to be over by 1948, the works of the cultural front had a profound impact on American culture, informing the life-work of two generations of artists and intellectuals. For the first time in the history of the United States, a working-class culture had made a significant imprint on the dominant cultural institutions. Both high culture and mass culture took on a distinctly plebeian accent. Black and ethnic writers, descendants of the proletarian avant-garde, dominated twentieth-century American literature. Vernacular musics like jazz, blues, and country resonated around the world. Gangster movies and *films noir* had founded the "American" look in film. The cultural front had begun a laboring of American culture.

PART I

The Left and American Culture

1

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" ghettoes. 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 Lizabeth 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 photomagazine, *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 Lizabeth 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 Cvetic 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,