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## The Protean Character of American Liberalism

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GARY GERSTLE

IN HIS CLASSIC WORK, *The Age of Reform*, Richard Hofstadter proposed that the New Deal marked a “drastic new departure . . . in the history of American reform.” Although many elements signaled this new departure, at its core was the New Dealers’ rejection of what Hofstadter characterized as the “insistent moralism of the Progressives” and their embrace instead of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s call for “bold, persistent experimentation.” Whereas Progressives had been preoccupied with matters of moral strength and weakness, New Dealers were guided by urgent, practical questions concerning what political and economic arrangements would get the economy working again. If, in addressing such issues, reformers were led to act in amoral ways—for instance, to work with corrupt city bosses or scheming monopolists—so be it. From Hofstadter’s perspective, the point of politics was not moral reformation but economic recovery.<sup>1</sup>

Hofstadter’s insistence on the amoral, instrumental character of New Deal reform seems wrong to anyone who has studied the politics of the 1930s from the bottom up. For millions of ordinary Americans, especially the workers, farmers, and urban dwellers who participated in the decade’s mass movements, the New Deal was above all a great moral crusade meant to restore justice, fairness, democracy, and equality to their rightful place in the republic’s economic life. The reservoir of patriotism flowing into the New Deal—its “real Americanism,” in the words of the 1936 Democratic Party platform—and the reverence felt by so many for FDR throughout his presidency and beyond further underscore the New

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I am also grateful for opportunities to present earlier versions of this essay to scholars at the Institute for Advanced Study, the Seminar on Politics, Culture, and Society at New York University’s Department of History, the Catholic University of America, and the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. Each presentation generated vigorous conversation and debate and prompted me to revise my work in significant ways. Finally, I would like to thank the following people for their close and penetrating readings: Alan Brinkley, Leon Fink, Steve Fraser, James Gilbert, Walter Jackson, Michael Kammen, Michael Katz, Michael Kazin, James Kloppenberg, Michael Lacey, Elizabeth Lunbeck, Peter Mandler, Arno Mayer, John Murrin, Bruce Nelson, Carl Nightingale, Roy Rosenzweig, Hilda Sabato, Elliott Shore, Fred Siegel, Peter Wagner, Jon Wakelyn, Michael Walzer, Andrew Weiss, Robert Westbrook, and several anonymous *AHR* reviewers.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 303, 316–17.

Deal's transcendence of the pragmatic, utilitarian quality that Hofstadter took pains to stress.<sup>2</sup>

But if Hofstadter erred in defining the New Deal as devoid of moral fervor, he did astutely identify what distinguished New Deal reform from what had preceded it. Missing from the New Deal was the Progressive preoccupation with individual virtue and vice. Progressives had been intent on reforming individuals and improving character. Civil servants were to be made honest and efficient; immigrants were to be educated in the ways of American democracy; young women were to be saved from prostitution, young men from drink. These character-building intentions, which gave rise to crusades for "good government," Americanization, social hygiene, and Prohibition, were essential stepping stones, Progressives believed, to fashioning the unified moral community that they desired. New Dealers, by contrast, expressed little interest in remaking individuals or in uniting all Americans into a single moral community. They reserved their moral passion for economic reform; their moral compass pointed to such words and phrases as "security," "opportunity," and "industrial democracy." This pattern was set in the earliest days of the New Deal, when the federal government embarked on a whirlwind of economic reforms (the legendary "Hundred Days") while simultaneously announcing, through the expeditious handling of Prohibition's repeal, its retirement from the job of "morals" policeman.<sup>3</sup>

Believing that American reform had benefited from the removal of moral issues from politics, Hofstadter regarded the New Deal as superior to Progressivism. But such a judgment is open to challenge. If the Progressives' concern with individual behavior had its more repressive side, it also imbued their age with a remarkably capacious notion of reform, one not limited to questions of political economy. The feminist campaign for equal rights blossomed under Progressivism, and the modern movement for black equality, symbolized by the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910, was born. The first demands for cultural pluralism—what we now call multiculturalism—date from this era as well. Sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity all became subjects of intense debate and reform.

New Deal reform, by contrast, was more narrowly conceived. Little feminist activity emerged during those years, and questions of race and ethnicity received scant national attention. To take but one example: in 1936, when the New Deal was at its most expansive, the framers of the Democratic Party platform called for "a democracy of opportunity for all the people." Who were the people? Farmers, workers, small businessmen. Barely a word in the entire document spoke to the particular concerns of blacks, women, or ethnics.<sup>4</sup> Members of these groups were welcomed into the New Deal—indeed, they constituted its backbone—but only when subsumed under economic categories. Although anger at racial injustice and cultural prejudice was a motivating force among many who gave their votes

<sup>2</sup> Democratic National Committee, *The Campaign Handbook of the Democratic Party, Candidates and Issues* (n.p., 1936), 6.

<sup>3</sup> On the Progressive preoccupation with virtue and vice, see Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), part 4. On Prohibition's repeal, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, 1963), 46–47.

<sup>4</sup> Democratic National Committee, *Campaign Handbook*, 2–4.

to the New Deal, it found little expression in contemporaneous liberal politics. In the liberalism of the day, the American people were divided into and represented by economic categories. Economic issues, metaphors, and antagonists dominated the New Deal's language of political mobilization and conflict.

Why economic language should have been so dominant in 1930s liberalism is a question that has attracted little attention. This is in part because the answer seems obvious: the shock of the Depression gave economic issues a "natural," overriding urgency.<sup>5</sup> But this explanation does not bear up under scrutiny, at least with respect to the intellectuals who gave ideological shape to New Deal liberalism. The primacy of political economy had already established itself in liberal circles in the prosperous 1920s and had far more to do with a crisis in liberal thought arising out of the Great War and the Russian Revolution than with the catastrophe of economic collapse. Designing a new liberalism that emphasized the "economic" and neglected the "cultural" was the way chosen by one group of influential liberal thinkers to put their embattled creed on a more secure foundation. How this liberalism took shape, how it gained, sustained, and then lost the power to set the terms of reform: these are the questions this essay will address.

CRITICAL TO THIS INVESTIGATION IS A BELIEF in the malleability of the "liberal tradition." Far from being a Hartzian creed etched in Lockean stone, liberalism in twentieth-century America has emerged as a variable, somewhat tractable, political philosophy.<sup>6</sup> The liberalism of our own time, with its emphasis on racial equality, minority rights, and expansive notions of individual freedom, differs substantially from the liberalism of the interwar years, which was focused on taming capitalism; further, both liberalisms differ from Progressivism. All three represent a substantial departure from the classical liberal program of limiting the government's right to interfere with the economic and political liberties of its citizens.

The protean character of American liberalism, so puzzling to European commentators, is in part traceable to its role as a surrogate socialism. Although the American polity successfully excluded a mass socialist or labor party from serious electoral competition from World War I on, it could not banish poverty, unemployment, excessive concentrations of economic power, and other ills associated with industrial capitalism. It fell to liberals to deal with these issues, which is why American liberalism has sometimes acquired a social democratic tinge and why would-be or one-time socialists—Florence Kelley, Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, Rexford Tugwell, Walter Reuther, Daniel Bell, Martin Luther King, Jr., Tom Hayden, to name but a few—often found themselves drawn into association with liberal projects.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This was Hofstadter's view; see *Age of Reform*, 302–08.

<sup>6</sup> For Hartz's theory of liberalism, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955).

<sup>7</sup> On the relationship of American socialism to American liberalism, see Irving Howe, "Socialism and Liberalism: Articles of Conciliation?" in his *Socialism and America* (San Diego, 1985), 147–76; Michael Harrington, *Socialism* (New York, 1973), chap. 11; Dorothy Ross, "Socialism and American Liberalism: Academic Social Thought in the 1880s," in *Perspectives in American History*, 11 (1977–78):

Liberalism is not infinitely flexible, of course. However much it changed, it never abandoned three foundational principles: emancipation, rationality, and progress. Indeed, liberalism's evolution can be understood as a series of efforts to reinterpret these principles in light of unexpected historical developments. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, classical liberals defined emancipation in political, economic, and cultural terms: as the universal extension of political rights, as the removal of feudal/mercantilist restraints on production and trade, and as the waning of ascriptive ("primitive") forms of association and identification (kin, tribal, religious). A belief in "man's" essentially rational and sociable nature was crucial to these emancipatory projects. This nature would flourish once "unnatural" political, economic, and cultural constraints were removed. Emancipation would lead not to a Hobbesian state of strife, coercion, or misery but to harmony, the rule of reason, and general happiness.<sup>8</sup>

When liberal policies failed to yield these results—when free enterprise became corporate monopoly, when freeing the slaves produced a caste system in the South, when America's free social and political environment failed to dissolve "coagulated" ethnic attachments—liberals were forced to concede that the mere release of human nature from unnatural restraints was no longer sufficient to ensure emancipation. Human nature had to be nurtured; individuals required a humane economic and social environment in which to live, and they needed instruction in how best to express and enjoy their individuality. Buoyed by the remarkable growth of scientific knowledge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, liberals turned to the state as an institutional medium capable of reconstructing society and of educating citizens in the task of intelligent living. Such rational interventions in society and culture would encourage individuals to cultivate their best human capacities. Relations among individuals and social groups would improve as a result, and history would be restored to its progressive, emancipatory path.<sup>9</sup>

Not all liberals followed this path, of course. Some doggedly clung to classical liberalism, even as such adherence turned them into de-facto defenders of corporate capitalism, segregation, and disenfranchisement. They effectively renounced the earlier liberal hope of universal emancipation—that every individual could enjoy the full flowering of his or her individuality. These liberals were well

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5–80. On the relationship of liberalism to socialism more generally, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Princeton, N.J., 1989), chap. 7.

<sup>8</sup> This notion of classical liberalism merges two classical liberalisms—one represented by Locke, the other by Adam Smith—that some theorists would prefer to keep distinct. Peter Laslett, ed., *Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, 1988); Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Edwin Cannan, ed. (New York, 1937). On the expectation that liberalism would erode ascriptive characteristics, see Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990). Christopher Lasch offers some intelligent commentary on liberalism's underlying beliefs in *The American Liberals and the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1962), vii–viii, *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York, 1935); Sidney Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865–1901* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1956); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York, 1986); David E. Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness: The Language of Politics from McKinley to Reagan* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987). See also L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (London, 1911); and Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (London, 1969).

represented on the Supreme Court and among corporate elites and the owners of small businesses. Although their political influence and their self-identity as liberals remained strong until the 1930s, they will not be treated here. Their story more properly belongs to the history of modern American conservatism.<sup>10</sup>

The majority of liberals, who did reconstruct their philosophy around the idea of a strong state, had barely settled into their new political orientation when they were struck by more unexpected shocks. The eruption of communism in 1917, with its call for emancipation through violent class struggle, deeply unsettled liberals who had believed that "liberation" and "revolution" could be achieved in a peaceful and orderly way. Moreover, the ugly racist and nationalist passions unleashed by World War I, at home and abroad, made liberals wonder whether the modern masses were capable of self-control, a characteristic they deemed essential to the success of a free society. The allure of emancipation dimmed for those who harbored these doubts, while the imperative of developing a rational and controlled democratic politics correspondingly increased. Some liberals turned to hierarchical notions of expertise, engineering, and technocracy—tools that would allow enlightened elites to manage the common peoples' quest for freedom.<sup>11</sup> Others sought to delineate a realm of social action in which ordinary people could be expected to behave in reasonable and democratic, rather than in irrational and intolerant, ways. Liberals who chose this second strategy rarely discussed their rationale. To admit that human frailties doomed certain reforms to failure ran counter to their deep belief in man's fundamentally good nature. But their actions nevertheless profoundly shaped the character of liberalism between the wars.

WHENEVER THE CHARACTER OF LIBERALISM CHANGED, so did the composition of the liberal community. The transition from classical to strong-state liberalism brought agrarian reformers such as William Jennings Bryan into the liberal fold and alienated those who still clung to *laissez faire*. The trauma of World War I resulted in the exit of many moral reformers from liberal ranks (including Bryan) and the entry of H. L. Mencken and his libertarian legions. These and other changes in constituency make it unwise to treat the liberal community as a stable political entity or to presume that the criteria for identifying liberals in one period can be applied to another. Any effort to define the liberal community must be firmly located in time and space.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the liberal community was strongest in the industrial and commercial centers of the Northeast and Midwest. It had cohered in the 1910s among European immigrants and their children, progressive trade unionists such as those who belonged to the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and Amalgamated Clothing Workers, settlement house workers, social workers, and others involved with urban reform. These liberals could be found in both the Republican and Democratic parties, although by 1916 the Democratic

<sup>10</sup> See Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (New York, 1955).

<sup>11</sup> See Leon Fink's incisive essay, "The Fearsome Public: Democratic Disenchantment and the Advance of Learning," unpublished, in author's possession.

Party had emerged as their preferred home. In the 1920s, the liberal constellation expanded to include Menckente libertarians, liberal Protestants, and growing numbers of intellectuals affiliated with universities or with newly established social science foundations such as the Social Science Research Council, the Spelman Fund, the National Bureau of Economic Research, and the Institute for Government Research.<sup>12</sup>

The intellectuals in this liberal community are of particular interest. They were the ones most imbued with the new liberal faith in science as a tool of reform and in the capacity of a strong state to educate and liberate. Those with the greatest influence were concentrated at a relatively few elite universities: Wisconsin, Chicago, Harvard, Yale, and, above all, Columbia. The number of Columbia academics who shaped American liberalism through their writings or, in the 1930s, as New Deal policy makers exceeded that of any other institution: John Dewey in philosophy, Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict in anthropology, Robert Lynd in sociology, Rexford Tugwell and Wesley Clair Mitchell in economics, Adolph Berle and William O. Douglas in law.<sup>13</sup>

Columbia's distinction arose not simply from the size and academic prestige of its faculty but also from its access to New York's thriving metropolitan community of independent intellectuals, writers, magazine editors, book publishers, and reformers. Hungry for ideas and eager to turn ideas into print, this urban public encouraged university-based intellectuals to seek influence beyond their academic specialties. They were invited to give public lectures, to join study groups, and to comment in print on major political issues of the day. As Thomas Bender has noted, John Dewey became a "wide-ranging and cosmopolitan intellectual" only after leaving Chicago for New York. Dewey's graduate student Max Eastman introduced Dewey to Greenwich Village, and his colleague Charles Beard asked him to join the "X" Club, a high-powered group of New York intellectuals, journalists, and political activists that met biweekly from 1903 to 1917. In this milieu, "Dewey learned to put his talk on general social, cultural, and political

<sup>12</sup> The Institute for Government Research was later renamed the Brookings Institution. Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz, "The American Philanthropic Foundation and the Public Sphere, 1890–1930," *Minerva*, 19 (Summer 1981): 266–70. On the roots of this interwar liberalism, see J. Joseph Huthmacher, "Urban Liberalism and the Age of Reform," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49 (September 1962): 231–41.

One can identify other liberal communities in the 1920s, most notably that emerging in the South around the issue of race. I do not treat the southern liberal tradition here, although any complete history of American liberalism would have to take it into account and make sense of its relationship to the dominant liberalism of the era. It would also have to stress the role of the University of North Carolina and, in particular, of sociologist Howard Odum in defining this liberalism. See Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York, 1977); Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990), chap. 3 in particular; John T. Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race, 1920–1944* (Chapel Hill, 1985); and John D. Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Charles Beard was a member of the Columbia government faculty until 1917, when he resigned to protest the university's suppression of faculty dissent during World War I. As a founding member of the New School for Social Research in 1919 and then as an independent intellectual, he remained very much a part of New York City's liberal community.

issues into print"; by the 1920s, he had become "America's great public philosopher."<sup>14</sup>

New York City's success in nurturing liberal intellectuals affected the entire country. Much of the nation's liberal thought reached the public through one of the city's liberal journals. The country's premier liberal magazine, the *New Republic*, operated out of a brownstone on West 21st Street. *The Nation* also had its offices in New York, as did the *Survey Graphic*. New York was liberalism's heart. For this reason, a disproportionate number of liberal intellectuals made New York their home, including several who will receive close examination in this essay—Herbert Croly, John Dewey, Robert and Helen Lynd, and Horace Kallen. To understand the liberalism they constructed in the 1920s and 1930s, we must first consider the liberalism—Progressivism—they cast off.

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH and early twentieth-century United States, reformers who fashioned themselves Progressives altered classical liberalism as they attempted to address the unanticipated complexities of their industrial society. Two of the issues that Progressives found most perplexing were the extraordinary concentration of power and wealth in the hands of relatively small numbers of industrialists and bankers and the bewildering array and unexpected vigor of ethnic cultures among the working people.

Progressive reformers' efforts to devise new formulas that would guarantee freedom of trade and individual liberty in a society suddenly dominated by economically and politically powerful corporations are well documented. In fact, Progressivism is often understood as a constellation of such formulas, some of which called for new democratic procedures more impervious to manipulation by the "Interests" (and more invigorating to a dispirited citizenry), others of which called on the state to regulate or to break up large-scale economic institutions, still others of which focused on the empowerment of subaltern groups such as workers, farmers, and, to a lesser extent, consumers. Campaigning against the "Interests" and the "Trusts," some liberals began elaborating an American theory of corporatism that called for a strong state both to regulate the corporations and to help workers and farmers organize themselves and press their demands. Other liberals were attracted to the English theory of guild socialism, which held the promise of group empowerment while keeping the state small. Herbert Croly elaborated American versions of both approaches, the corporatist in his famous work *The Promise of American Life* (1909) and the guild socialist in his less well known *Progressive Democracy* (1914). Both were disseminated widely through the pages of the *New Republic*, the liberal weekly he founded in 1914.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Bender, *New York Intellectual: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York, 1987), 309–10, and chap. 8 *passim*. The urban cultures of other metropolitan cities such as Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and San Francisco nourished intellectual life, too, but none in this period could rival New York in size, intensity, or national influence.

<sup>15</sup> The literature on the economic dimension of Progressivism is immense. The more important general works include Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910–1917* (New York, 1954); Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*; Samuel Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914* (Chicago,



Progressives were concerned equally with the problem of culture, however, believing that society's problems could not be successfully resolved without a thoroughgoing reform of morals, aesthetics, and traditions. To Croly's way of thinking, the most well-intentioned economic reforms would accomplish little if not accompanied by a "new nationalism." Many historians have interpreted Croly's "new nationalism" in terms of political economy, as the use of Hamiltonian means (a strong central government) to check the private power of industry and finance.<sup>16</sup> But for Croly himself, the creation of a new nationalism was a task of cultural reconstruction independent of his program for economic reform. Throughout *The Promise of American Life*, Croly stressed that the American people had to stitch themselves together in moral as well as in economic ways, a point he drove home in the book's last few paragraphs, where he declared "that the task of individual and social regeneration must remain incomplete and impoverished, until the conviction and feeling of human brotherhood enters into the possession of the human spirit."<sup>17</sup>

Although not all Progressives spoke in this sort of spiritual idiom, most shared Croly's underlying belief that successful economic reform depended on a parallel program of moral renewal. Indeed, this belief accounts for much that was distinctive about Progressive reform. For many Progressives, the emphasis on morality expressed the Protestant faith instilled in them as children. Even those who had turned their backs on formal religion were still certain that society would benefit from sustained and secularized campaigns for moral improvement.<sup>18</sup> These campaigns came in all shapes and sizes: Croly sought spiritual nourishment in the arts; "political" Progressives such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell focused on rooting out corruption in government and industry; "social" Progressives such as Jane Addams hoped to rehabilitate those urban dwellers who, for reasons of poverty, isolation, ignorance, or moral weakness, had fallen into vice; suffragists argued that giving women the vote would moralize politics, while prohibitionists insisted that the elimination of drink would keep men's baser instincts in check. The notion binding all these campaigns together—most broadly, that the reinvigoration of democracy depended on moral regeneration as much as it did on economic reform—also impelled Progressives to devote a great deal of attention to the immigrant millions in their midst. The problem of integrating immigrants into American society could not be solved simply by finding them good jobs or distributing to them sufficient fruits from American

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1957); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900–1918* (Boston, 1968); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877–1919* (New York, 1987); Martin Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism: The Market, the Law and Politics* (Cambridge, 1988); Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). On Croly, see Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of Liberalism: Croly, Weyl, Lippmann, and the Progressive Era, 1900–1925* (New York, 1961); and David W. Levy, *Herbert Croly of the New Republic: The Life and Thought of an American Progressive* (Princeton, N.J., 1985).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 18–20.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York, 1909), 453. For a perceptive rendering of Croly's thought, see Bender, *New York Intellectual*, 222–27.

<sup>18</sup> On the religious roots of Progressivism, see Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889–1920* (New York, 1982).

capitalism, although these tasks were important. Immigrants had to be "Americanized," culturally and morally transformed from aliens into citizens, and given a sense of membership in and loyalty to the nation.<sup>19</sup>

Even if Progressives could agree on the importance of moral regeneration, their actual efforts to transmute their moral sensibilities into political programs triggered conflict. The Progressives were a diverse lot. In addition to urban liberals, their ranks included William Jennings Bryan, William La Follette, and other agrarian reformers who were heirs to the Populists, southern Democrats such as Josephus Daniels committed to anticorporate economics and racial segregation, and Republican gentry (such as Theodore Roosevelt) whose distaste for commercialism had impelled them toward reform. Because of these broad differences in background and aspiration, the Progressives had difficulty fashioning a cultural politics to which they could all adhere. The issue of immigration illustrates the problem. Rightward-leaning Progressives such as Roosevelt minced no words about their low regard for the immigrants' cultural heritages or their desire to impress America's superior Anglo-Saxon mores upon them. Many other Progressives who did not publicly indulge in harsh racial stereotyping or subscribe to calls for coercive Americanization nevertheless regarded the dissolution of ethnic cultures and their replacement by a thoroughly American identity as one of Progressivism's most important tasks.<sup>20</sup>

A distinctly different cultural politics emerged among left-leaning Progressives, however, especially among those whose work in settlement houses and schools had given them an intimate knowledge of and appreciation for immigrant cultures. Jane Addams, Emily Balch, John Dewey, Louis Brandeis, and others regarded the immigrants' Old World heritages as cultural treasures too important to destroy; these heritages were to be preserved outright or integrated into a cosmopolitan American nationalism. It was not easy for the likes of Addams and Dewey, immersed since youth in the culture of American Protestantism and republicanism, to acknowledge an equivalent value in the very different heritages of immigrants, especially of those from Southern and Eastern Europe. But they struggled hard to do so, and their work made it easier for a younger generation of Progressives, led by Horace Kallen and Randolph Bourne, to celebrate ethnic

<sup>19</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York, 1904); Ida Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York, 1904); Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York, 1910); Aileen S. Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890-1920* (New York, 1965); Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn., 1981). See also Paul F. Bourke, "The Status of Politics, 1909-1919: The New Republic, Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks," in *American Studies*, 8 (August 1974): 171-202; Casey Nelson Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1990), chaps. 3-4 in particular; and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York, 1991), *passim*, for illuminating commentary on Progressive "moralism."

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Straight Americanism," in Hermann Hagedorn, ed., *The Americanism of Theodore Roosevelt: Selections from His Writings and Speeches* (Boston, 1923), 199-210; Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York, 1890), *passim*. The theme of discarding European baggage and forming a new, and distinctively American, identity is what made Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* (New York, 1909) so popular among Progressives.

diversity—what Kallen would call cultural pluralism—as the true spirit of Americanism.<sup>21</sup>

The ideological intensity of war revealed the underlying irreconcilability of these divergent Progressive approaches. With Roosevelt and his allies screaming for “100 percent Americanism” and Kallen, Bourne, and others denouncing the ugly coercion and conformity they saw as central to such campaigns, Progressivism lost its coherence as a political movement. But until that time, Progressives managed to hold differences on cultural questions in check. At crucial moments, such as Roosevelt’s run for the presidency on the Progressive “Bull Moose” party ticket in 1912, they made common cause. Their shared commitment to addressing questions of ethnic diversity, national identity, and moral well-being gave them a common ground large enough to accommodate a range of policy disagreements. Their determination to elaborate a program of reform that addressed itself both to political economy and to cultural politics, that refused to make culture a function of economics, or vice versa, was a hallmark of pre-World War I liberalism distinguishing it both from classical liberalism and from a new, economically oriented liberalism that emerged from the excitements and disillusionments of World War I.

AS LATE AS 1917, ON THE EVE OF AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN THE GREAT WAR, a majority of Americans were not eager to fight. Their enthusiasm for war had to be aroused, their loyalty to the nation-state secured. Woodrow Wilson sought to mobilize support by portraying the war as a means of extending Progressive reform, both in the United States and abroad: this was to be a “war to end all wars,” a “war for democracy” in which the power of old monarchs and empires would be crushed and the freedom of ordinary people everywhere would be enhanced. In calling on Americans to participate in this great crusade, Wilson thought he could draw on the Progressives’ desire to unite all citizens in a single community of shared values and aspirations. But America was too heterogeneous a society and the opposition to war was too deep for that community to be built overnight through exhortation alone. Thus the Wilson administration turned rather quickly to coercion—censoring the mail, curtailing the rights of free speech

<sup>21</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New York, 1955), is illuminating on the “left” and “right” versions of Progressive cultural politics; see chap. 9 in particular. On the “left” version, see also Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890–1919* (Chicago, 1989); Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, chap. 11; John Dewey, “The School as Social Center,” *Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the National Education Association* (1902); Dewey, “Nationalizing Education,” *ibid.* (1916); “Universal Service as Education,” *New Republic*, April 22, 29, 1916; John Dewey to Horace M. Kallen, March 31 and April 16, 1915, Box 7, File 13, Horace M. Kallen Papers, Manuscript Collection No. 1, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio (hereafter, AJC); Horace M. Kallen, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” *The Nation*, February 18, 25, 1915; Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” in Randolph Bourne, *The Radical Will: Selected Writings, 1911–1918*, Olaf Hansen, ed. (New York, 1977), 248–64; Louis Brandeis, “True Americanism,” in *Brandeis on Zionism: A Collection of Addresses and Statements by Louis D. Brandeis* (Washington, D.C., 1942), 3–11; and Oswald Garrison Villard, *Fighting Years: Memoirs of a Liberal Editor* (New York, 1939), 191–200, 236–42.

and assembly, jailing aliens and dissenters.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, the administration brought into the open a dilemma intrinsic to Progressive politics but one that many Progressives had yet to think through: Was the use of force justified in achieving a community of shared morals and common purpose?

Rightward-leaning Progressives, on the whole, answered that question affirmatively. They outdid the administration in their determination to discipline cultural and political dissenters. They fought successfully for Prohibition, helped to secure the first federal law in a generation restricting immigration and harassed immigrants already here with their "100 percent Americanism" campaigns. When even these measures failed to attain the desired level of cultural conformity, many Progressives lost their enthusiasm for reform altogether and reemerged, in the 1920s, as reactionaries—obsessed with restoring America to some imagined state of cultural homogeneity and moral purity. The American Legion, fundamentalism, and even the Ku Klux Klan all drew support from those who, ten years earlier, had considered themselves Progressives. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., founded the American Legion in 1919, hoping that, with its vigilance in identifying subversive groups and activities, it would carry on the political work of his deceased father. William Jennings Bryan adhered to his populist principles until his death in 1926, but they were barely discernible in his fundamentalist crusade to restore Christian faith and biblical truth to the classroom. Those who followed the path of a Roosevelt or Bryan had, by the mid-1920s, exited the world of American reform.<sup>23</sup>

The war and postwar history of left-leaning Progressives was strikingly different. A few had refused to accept the legitimacy of the war or the use of government power to legislate conformity; from their ranks in the 1920s would come the American Civil Liberties Union and Mencken-style libertarianism. A larger number withheld their support until the Russian Revolution of 1917 generated apocalyptic excitement in their ranks. Viewing the tsar's fall as vindication of Wilson's claim that the United States was indeed engaged in a "war for democracy," they embraced the American war effort as their own. As a result of making this embrace, investing their hopes in Wilson, and then suffering through the disillusionment of Versailles and the domestic repression of 1919, they substantially changed the character of liberal politics.

The tsar's fall and the consequent enthusiasm for war had two major effects on the politics of left-leaning Progressives—or liberals, as they increasingly called themselves. First, it made them complicit in the Wilson administration's repressive wartime policies. Second, it inclined them to look sympathetically at the new forms of democratic governance that seemed to be arising in Russia. In particular, these liberals found in the "soviet" an exciting form of extra-parliamentary, direct democracy. They began calling for the extension of the principles of political

<sup>22</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York, 1980), 3–92; Horace C. Peterson and Gilbert C. Fite, *Opponents of War, 1917–1918* (Madison, Wis., 1957).

<sup>23</sup> Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, chaps. 9–10; William Pencak, *For God and Country: The American Legion, 1919–1941* (Boston, 1989); Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991); Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921–1928* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991); Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan; The Last Decade, 1915–1925* (New York, 1965).

democracy to economic life in the United States. As the iron grip of Bolshevik control increasingly made the soviets appear too radical an experiment to try in American circumstances, liberals harkened to the tamer calls for industrial democracy emanating from British guild socialists such as Harold Laski and G. D. H. Cole and, by 1918, from the British Labour Party itself. A fearsome concatenation of strikes by American workers in 1919 impelled liberals to endorse the British way with ever more fervor, as it seemed the only step that could possibly forestall a Bolshevik-style revolution in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

Liberals' espousal of "industrial democracy" alone should not be interpreted as a sharp break from Progressive thinking. Progressives before the war had been concerned about inequalities in wealth and power between capitalists and workers and had long been searching for some way to reinvigorate American democracy. Their encounter with the Russian Revolution deepened—some would say radicalized—their concern and convinced them that the moment for far-reaching economic reconstruction had arrived. But it was only because this deepening commitment to economic reconstruction occurred *in conjunction with* a profound disenchantment with the possibilities of cultural reconstruction that World War I became a transformative moment in liberal thought.

The sources of cultural disenchantment were, to a certain extent, independent of the Russian Revolution and "the labor question." In 1919, liberals saw their hopes for a new world order crushed by the cynical, punitive terms the Allies forced on Germany through the Treaty of Versailles. They now cast a critical eye on overheated nationalist passions, both for encouraging the outbreak of war and for undermining the chances for a rational and fair peace. They could not, moreover, treat these passions as a peculiarly Old World debility, for American nationalist sentiments, whipped to a frenzy by war mobilization, had produced rampant intolerance of immigrants, radicals, blacks, intellectuals, and others whose words and customs could be construed as "unAmerican." The year 1919 was marked by harsh Americanization campaigns, Prohibition, the Palmer raids, race riots, and clamor for immigration restriction.<sup>25</sup> Liberals recoiled from this intolerance, abandoning programs to which they had been committed before the United States entered the war. These programs—emphasizing ethnic contributions (what Jane Addams labeled "immigrant gifts") to American culture, proselytizing for a "new nationalism," insisting on moral rectitude—too easily contributed to group antagonisms, liberals now believed, and were a spur to virulent nativism and racism. Feeling themselves impotent in the face of a reactionary nationalism, and perhaps guilty as well for helping to create this cultural

<sup>24</sup> Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly, articles in the *New Republic*, April 14, 1917, and September 15, 1917; unsigned articles in *ibid.*, June 29, 1918, and February 1, 1919; *New Republic*, Supplement, "Labour and the Social Order," February 16, 1918. See also Lasch, *American Liberals, passim*; Stanley Shapiro, "The Great War and Reform: Liberals and Labor, 1917–1919," *Labor History*, 12 (Summer 1971): 232–44; Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York, 1991), 114–45.

Harold Laski, who lived in Cambridge, Mass., and taught at Harvard in the years 1915–1920, played a critical role in knitting together American liberals and British Labourites. See Paul F. Bourke, "The Pluralist Reading of James Madison's Tenth *Federalist*," *Perspectives in American History*, 9 (1975): 271–94.

<sup>25</sup> Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, chaps. 8–9.

Frankenstein, liberals gave up the fight to create a new culture and new nationalism for the masses. Action on the cultural front only made the prospects for liberal progress worse.

In this climate of disillusionment, some left-leaning Progressives abandoned politics altogether. The flight of intellectuals to Europe reflected widespread despair in artistic circles concerning the possibility of progress of any sort—cultural or economic, liberal or socialist. Political demoralization was equally apparent in the bitter delight aroused by H. L. Mencken's biting social commentary, especially by his savage depictions of average Americans as small-town buffoons and his ridicule of ill-conceived liberal attempts at education and uplift. Walter Lippmann, a central figure in Herbert Croly's *New Republic* liberal circle who was profoundly shaken by the war's outcome and taken with Mencken's iconoclasm, maintained his beliefs in progress and in the efficacy of rational social action but not in democracy. In his view, average citizens, buffeted by sophisticated propaganda emanating from ever larger, more centralized, and more powerful opinion-making organizations, had lost mastery of their own minds; they could no longer make the kind of informed, rational judgments required to make popular sovereignty work. Only the rule of experts, of men like himself, could render government in the United States effective and just.<sup>26</sup>

The critique of democracy proffered by Mencken and Lippmann was incisive, and liberals who were determined to remain politically engaged had to take it into account. They did so by jettisoning projects of moral improvement and intensifying their focus on economic reorganization. Both Mencken and Lippmann pointed to the role of large-scale capitalism and its attendant business civilization in stupefying the American people. Some argued, therefore, that a thoroughgoing reform of capitalism could salvage democracy and reinvigorate the nation's culture; ethnic, racial, and all other cultural problems would be resolved once relations between capital and labor were put on a sound footing. This is the stance the Progressive stalwart Frederick Howe invoked when he declared (in 1922) that "the problem of immigration, like the problem of America, is the re-establishment of economic democracy."<sup>27</sup> John Dewey, another Progressive who had contributed significantly to debates about immigrants—their culture, schooling, and loyalty—also conceived of postwar reconstruction largely in terms of the transformation of the condition of labor in American society.<sup>28</sup> In the 1920s, this founding member of the NAACP grew silent on the still-vexing questions raised by America's racial and ethnic diversity, publishing dozens of essays, none of them focused on African Americans. Only once did he protest the racist character of the immigration restriction system put in place between 1921 and 1924, and his protest was motivated not by his concern that such a system betrayed liberal ideals but that it would inflame militarist passions in Japan and thereby increase the

<sup>26</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York, 1934), 74–80 in particular; Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of American Reform* (New York, 1977), 244–46; Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York, 1925).

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Howe, "The Alien," in Harold Stearns, *Civilization in the United States: An Inquiry by Thirty Americans* (New York, 1922). Mencken and Lippmann, of course, did not share this view.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, his "Elements of Social Reorganization," in Joseph Ratner, ed., *Character and Events: Popular Essays in Social and Political Philosophy by John Dewey* (1918; New York, 1929), 2: 745–59.

likelihood of war.<sup>29</sup> Dewey, moreover, turned away from his personal involvement with immigrants: his grass-roots work with the ethnic populations living near Chicago's Hull House, his field research into the Polish community of Philadelphia, and his love affair with the young Polish-Jewish writer Anzia Yezierska—all these experiences he safely tucked away into an earlier (pre-1920), and now bygone, era.<sup>30</sup>

Dewey still considered racial or religious bigotry abhorrent; he lived in a cosmopolitan milieu in which such prejudice was not tolerated. To a number of teacher groups, he spoke movingly about the need for a curriculum "which will make the different racial elements in this country aware of what each has contributed" and thus help extinguish "the flames of hatred and suspicion." But in these speeches, as in his other public statements, Dewey's attention invariably focused not on racial discrimination but on "the social divisions that come from economic and industrial forces" and "the problems of capital and labor" arising from these divisions. Students had to be taught how economic power affected the machinery of government, and they had to be put on their guard against "the deadening influences [of factory work and industrial life] which will dull their imagination and inventiveness." These, not ethnic and racial comity, were the greatest civic tasks confronting the schools.<sup>31</sup>

IN HIS *Liberalism in America*, PUBLISHED IN 1919, a young Harold Stearns pummeled his fellow liberals for their hypocritical and pusillanimous behavior during the Great War. On the one hand, he argued, liberals had strutted about, confident that their hardheaded and pragmatic techniques would solve any political problem; on the other, they seemed all too eager to abandon policies that had gone awry or else to cover up their mistakes with vague and evasive abstractions.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> John Dewey, "Public Opinion in Japan," *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale, Ill., 1976-83), vol. 13, 1921-1922, 261. The Johnson-Reid Immigration Act of 1924 stipulated that annual immigration would be limited to 165,000 per year and that most of the openings would be reserved for immigrants from northwestern Europe. The thinly veiled objective of the act was to reduce drastically the immigration of "inferior" peoples from Southern and Eastern Europe. William S. Bernard, "Immigration: A History of U.S. Policy," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 492-95.

<sup>30</sup> Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 212-23; Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (New York, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> John Dewey, "The School as a Means of Developing a Social Consciousness and Social Ideals in Children," and "Social Purposes in Education," in Boydston, *The Middle Works*, vol. 15, 1923-1924, 150-69. Dewey's turn away from immigrant issues and its connection to his intensifying concern with political economy is still poorly understood, despite a large literature on Dewey that includes Westbrook's fine biography and a heated though sterile debate among historians of education regarding Dewey's "true" attitudes toward immigrants. For an introduction to this latter controversy, see Walter Feinberg, "Progressive Education and Social Planning," *Teachers College Record*, 73 (May 1972); Clarence J. Karier, "Liberalism and the Quest for Orderly Change," *History of Education Quarterly*, 12 (Spring 1972): 57-80; J. Christopher Eisele, "John Dewey and the Immigrants," and Charles L. Zerby, "John Dewey and the Polish Question: A Response to the Revisionist Historians," *History of Education Quarterly*, 15 (Spring 1975): 17-30, 67-85. Dearborn's *Love in the Promised Land* is suggestive on Dewey's sudden flight from immigrant issues; and Ronald K. Goodenow, "Racial and Ethnic Tolerance in John Dewey's Educational and Social Thought: The Depression Years," *Educational Theory*, 27 (Winter 1977): 48-64, is illuminating.

<sup>32</sup> Harold Stearns, *Liberalism in America: Its Origins, Its Temporary Collapse, Its Future* (New York, 1919), 124-47 in particular.

Part of Stearns's critique—the liberal penchant for running away from policies that had turned out badly—would seem to account for liberals' flight from cultural issues once they realized that their work for a cosmopolitan nationalism had yielded embarrassingly parochial and nativist results. But such a general explanation collapses under the weight of closer examination. Stearns's reflections failed to anticipate the kind of thorough, and unblinking, reckoning that liberals would undertake to make sense of what they considered their mistakes. The pacifism that dominated 1920s liberal thought, for example, showed not only an ability to acknowledge fully the failure of the Wilsonian strategy of peace and democracy through war but also a determination to develop an alternative politics more faithful to liberal ideals.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the recoiling from Bolshevism in 1918–1919 did not lead to liberal abandonment of hopes for economic reconstruction but rather to democratic plans for capitalism's reform.<sup>34</sup> What requires explanation, then, is not a general habit of running from mistaken policies but a particular flight from failed cultural politics. In the wake of the reactionary nationalism of the postwar years, liberals might have committed themselves more strongly to the ideals of cultural pluralism; they might have raised a storm of indignation about the racism underlying the Johnson-Reid Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 (similar to the fury they unleashed on the expression of militarist sentiment at home and abroad). That they did not suggests that liberals found it easier to confront and transcend the failure of social action in some spheres than in others. Why was this so?

The answer may lie in the perceived nature of the spheres themselves. Liberals conceived of the international and economic arenas as populated by rational actors—nation-states in the former, industry and labor in the latter. These actors might behave irrationally on occasion, but they were fundamentally driven by interests that were knowable, analyzable, and thus controllable through regulation or reform. The cultural arena, by contrast, was populated by irrational actors—ethnic, racial, and religious groups driven more by passions than by interests and thus less suitable as targets for social action. For liberals, cultural issues were, by nature, more difficult to address; the path of progress was elusive, the achievement of emancipation uncertain. Even those Progressives, like Dewey, who were most understanding of ethnic needs and most committed to developing an inclusive American nationalism, had never felt entirely comfortable in the presence of strong ethnic cultures. During the hopeful days of Progressivism, they had put aside their suspicions and bravely tolerated, even encouraged, a kind of ethnic diversity. In the pessimistic years following the war, however, their suspicions returned, and they retreated to a more classically liberal position: it would be best for irrational, ascriptive identities to disappear or, at least, to cease being the subject of political debate or social action.

Liberals such as Dewey found justification for this political retreat in the teachings of psychiatry and psychology, allied intellectual disciplines that had acquired a measure of authority and prestige by the 1920s. Psychiatrists and

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Charles DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform in American History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980).

<sup>34</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston, 1957), 130–44.



psychologists had not discovered the irrational, of course, but they mapped its contours with such confidence and in such detail that many intellectuals accepted their claims to have discovered a second new world. Scholars and lay people of all sorts pored over Sigmund Freud's writings on the unconscious and William James's guides to "instinct," "habit," and other heretofore hidden stretches of the human psyche. They found in these new mental maps confirmation of what their observations of "the masses" had suggested: that ordinary people were often gripped by emotions, prejudices, and feelings that they did not understand and could not control. In the hands of Lippmann, this was scientific corroboration that justified abandoning the democratic idea that ordinary people were capable of self-control and self-rule. In the hands of Dewey and others determined to remain democrats, it reinforced an inclination to limit reform movements to those issues or arenas in which irrational impulses could be checked.<sup>35</sup>

On one occasion, an address in 1921 to Chinese political scientists (in China) on the causes of racial and ethnic prejudice in America, Dewey talked explicitly about his desire to keep irrational issues off his reform agenda. The prejudice that had engulfed America after the war, Dewey told his audience, contained both irrational and rational elements. The irrational component expressed man's "instinctive" fear of "the stranger," a fear accentuated when the foreigners were culturally or physiognomically different from the native-born.<sup>36</sup> The rational element Dewey located in the rise of political nationalism on the one hand and the economic competition among ethnic and racial groups for scarce material goods on the other.<sup>37</sup> While these rational and irrational components were analytically distinct, in practice they were impossible to disentangle. Thus to combat race friction directly—through, for instance, a vigorous civil rights movement or a concerted educational project designed to make individuals conscious of their intolerance—invariably would stir up irrational habits and instincts and thus ensure the campaign's defeat. "Individuals here and there," Dewey noted, "achieve freedom from prejudice and rational control of instinctive bias with comparative ease. But the mass cannot attain it," not even with the help of determined educational and publicity campaigns.<sup>38</sup> What, then, could be done for blacks who had suffered through race riots, or Southern and Eastern Europeans who encountered rising levels of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism? "I see no great hope for alleviation," Dewey grimly intoned. "The simple fact of the case is that at present the world is not sufficiently civilized to permit close contact of peoples of widely different cultures without deplorable consequences."<sup>39</sup> Here,

<sup>35</sup> On the enormous influence of psychology and psychiatry on American intellectuals between the wars, see Robert M. Crunden, *From Self to Society, 1919–1941* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), chaps. 2–3 in particular.

<sup>36</sup> John Dewey, "Racial Prejudice and Friction," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, 6 (1922): 2–7.

<sup>37</sup> Dewey, "Racial Prejudice and Friction," 8–12.

<sup>38</sup> Dewey, "Racial Prejudice and Friction," 14–15. Here, Dewey is giving voice to an elitist sentiment that, as David Hollinger has shrewdly observed, characterized large stretches of the American intelligentsia from the 1920s through the 1960s. See his "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia," in David A. Hollinger, *In the American Province: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ideas* (1985; Baltimore, Md., 1989), 56–73.

<sup>39</sup> Dewey, "Racial Prejudice and Friction," 13–14.

Dewey actually admitted what his 1920s writings and speeches so often implied: that “unrestricted contact through immigration and by similar activities should not take place.”<sup>40</sup> The number of strangers in the land, in other words, should be sharply limited; America’s immigrant gates should be closed. Dewey did not specifically endorse a racist restriction act, but everything he said to his Chinese audience indicated he would be willing to tolerate one. Such legislation would at least give the United States and the world essential “rest and recuperation.”<sup>41</sup> Reformers could proceed with the rational tasks of economic reconstruction and universal disarmament, tasks that, if successfully carried out, would reduce the sources of racial friction over the long term. Meanwhile, direct efforts to ease racial prejudice would have to wait.<sup>42</sup>

SOME MIGHT DISPUTE this analysis, which stresses the perceived rationality of an issue as the determinant of its presence on, or absence from, the liberal agenda. A popular line of argument holds that the economically oriented liberalism of the 1920s reflected “real” changes in economy and society. On the one hand, the fabled “consumer revolution” of that decade, which put cars, washing machines, radios, vacuum cleaners, and phonographs within reach of ordinary Americans, made capitalism and the material civilization it spawned the most powerful force in American life; questions of the proper division of power between capital and labor and of how to resist the deleterious effects of business civilization “naturally” drew liberal attention. On the other hand, questions of immigrant culture and autonomy decreased in importance as the second generation—the American-born children of immigrants—superseded the first and rapidly discarded their parents’ Old World traits and worries.<sup>43</sup>

That view of the 1920s, however, rests on a questionable reading of the historical evidence. In the first place, it cannot explain why the preoccupation with

<sup>40</sup> Dewey, “Racial Prejudice and Friction,” 17.

<sup>41</sup> Dewey, “Racial Prejudice and Friction,” 17.

<sup>42</sup> Dewey, “Racial Prejudice and Friction,” 16–17. This political abandonment of the realm of culture did not sit well with Dewey, for whom individual moral development was an important component of democratic politics. Thus, in his 1927 book *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey attempted to design a new cultural politics, one appropriate to an age in which man has “enormously enlarged [his] control of physical energies without any corresponding ability to control himself and his own affairs.” Dewey called for a “new kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist” and its dissemination beyond the ranks of scientific and policy experts to the entire society. This free flow of knowledge would not only give individuals insight into their modern predicament, it would also bring them together, give them a sense of shared experience and common purpose, and accelerate their transformation from a “Great Society” to a “Great Community.” The combination of knowledge and community would invigorate the democratic public and allow it to control, in a rational way, the energy and institutions of modern life. Although this was a noble vision, Dewey provided little guidance on how this transformation would actually be effected. Dewey’s vagueness simply underscored the difficulty of designing a cultural politics for the “irrational masses” of the machine age. See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (New York, 1927), 162, 175, in particular; Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 300–18.

<sup>43</sup> This view of the 1920s stretches back to Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York, 1931); and forward to Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984); and the contributors to Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York, 1983).

capitalism—its economics and its civilization—achieved primacy on the liberal agenda in the early 1920s, a moment in which the nation's economy was either mired in a postwar depression or in the early stages of recovery. The decade's record-shattering statistics of economic growth had yet to be compiled, and much of the extraordinary diffusion of consumer durables into American households had yet to occur. We can credit liberals for their clairvoyance in anticipating some of the effects of the consumer revolution, but to do so is also to admit that the powerful machine civilization they feared was as much mental construction as economic fact.

Moreover, the notion that, in the 1920s, questions of ethnic autonomy and culture had ceased to matter to the nation's immigrants or to their children is untenable. During that decade, millions of ethnics felt culturally besieged. They suffered from the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the plain wish of its four million members to rid the country of Catholics, Jews, and blacks. Not only were nativist and racist sentiments in ascendance but the government showed an unprecedented willingness to use its powers to encode such sentiments into law. Prohibition, mandatory Americanization programs, and immigration restriction were coercive measures designed to strip immigrants of their foreign languages, customs, and politics.<sup>44</sup>

This cultural coercion was not a minor, or regional, issue. Precisely how "ethnic" urban America was in the 1920s is not always appreciated. Consider these statistics from the 1930 census: immigrants and their children formed three-fourths of the population in New York City and Boston, two-thirds in Chicago, and more than half in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Detroit, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. These percentages *understate* the ethnic influence because they do not include the third generation—the grandchildren of those immigrants who arrived in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>45</sup> They also do not include the more than one million African Americans who had moved north since 1916. Harlem in the 1920s not only emerged as the capital of a black artistic renaissance, it also became home for hundreds of thousands of rural blacks fleeing privation and discrimination in the South. In the 1920s, in other words, ethnic and racial minorities predominated in American cities of the North, Midwest, and West. Attacks on minority cultures were issues of national import.

Ethnic minorities did not react passively to such attacks. To the contrary, 1920s-style repression made them more determined than ever to develop the political muscle necessary to defeat the forces of nativism, to get the "state" off their backs, and, if possible, turn governmental cultural policy in a more liberal direction. This political mobilization began to yield victories at the local level by the mid-1920s, as the swelling ranks of enfranchised ethnics generated sufficient votes to defeat anti-immigrant councilmen, mayors, state representatives, and even an occasional governor. In 1928, through the Democratic presidential campaign of the Catholic New York governor Alfred E. Smith (who made the election, in part, a referendum on Prohibition), the various local ethnic groups

<sup>44</sup> Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, chaps. 10–11.

<sup>45</sup> Statistics drawn from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population* (Washington, D.C., 1933), vol. 2, 67–73, 313–37.

discovered that they were part of a movement of national proportions. Their solidarity enabled Smith to carry the nation's twelve largest cities and signaled the emergence of the "ethnic vote" as a major political force.<sup>46</sup>

Liberal intellectuals could have written about these developments or used them as an occasion to press a campaign for racial or ethnic equality. Alternatively, they could have considered whether the persistence of strong ethnic and racial cultures meant that the nation's new business civilization was less overpowering than they had thought or that its effects varied from one cultural group to another. Some intellectuals, especially those, such as Alain Locke and Isaac Berkson, organically linked to one ethnic or racial group or another, did turn to these issues.<sup>47</sup> Yet their intellectual work counted for little in the liberal politics of the age. The most popular liberal historical work of the period, by far, was Charles Beard and Mary Beard's book *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), which portrayed American history almost exclusively in terms of the struggle between economic elites and the toiling masses; likewise, the most popular liberal social science work of the period was Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd's *Middletown*, which focused on the deleterious effects of capitalist civilization on traditional American values.<sup>48</sup> Ethnicity and race played no part in the Lynds' analysis. In fact, they deliberately chose for their case study a midwestern industrial town—Muncie, Indiana—virtually free of immigrants and blacks. Muncie was not free of racial prejudice, however. Indiana was a stronghold of the 1920s Klan, and the Lynds arrived in the state just as voters there were electing a Klansman as governor. Even though Muncie harbored a vigorous Klan organization, the Lynds paid scant attention to this phenomenon, judging it worthy of only four pages in their 502-page book.<sup>49</sup> In their estimation, no factor could be allowed to interfere with the primacy of capitalism and its social and cultural effects; ethnicity, race, and bigotry were ephemeral features of urban life that would simply distort any true assessment of American society.<sup>50</sup>

The Lynds cannot be accused of ignoring culture. They subtitled their book "A Study in Modern American Culture"; much of the book's appeal rested on its incisive ethnographic examination of Middletowners' lives at work and at school,

<sup>46</sup> See Kristi Andersen, *The Creation of a Democratic Majority, 1928–1936* (Chicago, 1979); for a glimpse of this process at work at the local level, see Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (Cambridge, 1989), chap. 1.

For blacks, the story was different. An African-American political mobilization did not occur in those years. Political pessimism reigned, especially once Marcus Garvey's black nationalist movement collapsed. Jeffrey Stewart has recently argued that the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s represented a kind of political retreat, at least for African-American intellectuals such as Alain Locke, who perceived that opportunities for political equality had vanished. Alain LeRoy Locke, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race*, Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed. (Washington, D.C., 1992), xli–xliii.

<sup>47</sup> Isaac B. Berkson, *Theories of Americanization: A Critical Study with Special Reference to the Jewish Group* (New York, 1920); Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York, 1925).

<sup>48</sup> On the popularity of *The Rise of American Civilization* and *Middletown*, see Stanley Coben, "The First Years of Modern America, 1918–1933," in William E. Leuchtenburg, ed., *The Unfinished Century: America since 1900* (Boston, 1973), 257–353.

<sup>49</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York, 1929), 481–84. On the Klan in Indiana and in Muncie, see Blee, *Women of the Klan*; and Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*.

<sup>50</sup> Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown*, 7–8; Helen Merrell Lynd, *Possibilities* (Youngstown, Ohio, 1983), 34.

at home and at play, at church and in fraternal organizations. But central to the Lynds' analysis was the belief that economic developments, apparent in the salience of class division and the proliferation of new tools and inventions, were determining the character and speed of social change in Middletown. The many social and personal tensions present in Middletown had arisen, in the Lynds' view, because local institutions and cultural values had failed to keep pace with the revolution in material life. This analysis, a version of the "cultural lag" theory popular among social scientists of the 1920s, effectively denied the autonomy of the cultural realm. On the one hand, the Lynds judged cultural developments solely in terms of how they assisted or complicated people's adjustments to economic change. On the other hand, the Lynds felt justified in excluding cultural phenomena—such as race and ethnicity—that seemed extraneous to the story of the rise of machine civilization.<sup>51</sup>

The Lynds' exclusion of ethnicity and race does not appear to have troubled many of *Middletown's* reviewers, who praised the book's anthropological method, thorough research, and, most of all, "objective" revelations about modern American society and culture. *Middletown* "gets closer to the truth about the normal Americano than any other I have ever heard of," exclaimed Mencken.<sup>52</sup> "Who touches this book touches the heart of America, nay, the heart of machine culture in the Western World," declared Stuart Chase in *The Nation*.<sup>53</sup> Several reviewers, including Mencken and Chase, duly noted the features of Middletown—its midwestern location, its relatively small size, the absence of ethnics and blacks—that made it less than representative of urban America. But the notion that the Lynds' findings and analysis might have been skewed by the peculiarities of Muncie, Indiana, and might thus have been of limited relevance to urban life elsewhere did not take hold in reviewers' minds. The Lynds had revealed "the disturbing wrinkles and crows-feet in *our* present-day industrial and social face," noted Whiting Williams in the *Saturday Evening Review*; "it is hard to gainsay the mirror's truth," Williams continued, "as to what *we* are and what *we* were thirty years ago."<sup>54</sup>

Only Max Lerner, writing in the *New York Evening Post*, demurred. He, too, was impressed by the research, the detail, and the comprehensiveness of the Lynds' study. But their central theme, "of a city in twilight, an area of mediocrity and frustration, a dim stage upon which was being enacted a tragedy of pale desires and petty ambitions," sounded too familiar. "Is it accident or the authors' intention," he wondered, "that when I am reading about Middletown I seem to be revisiting [Sinclair Lewis's] *Zenith*, where I first met Babbitt?" Perhaps because he was a social scientist himself, Lerner could not accept the idea that Middletown

<sup>51</sup> For an interesting essay on the evolution of the Middletown project, see Richard Wightman Fox, "Epitaph for Middletown: Robert S. Lynd and the Analysis of Consumer Culture," in Fox and Lears, eds., *Culture of Consumption*, 103–41.

<sup>52</sup> H. L. Mencken, "A City in Moronia," *The American Mercury*, 16 (1929): 379–81.

<sup>53</sup> Chase, review in *The Nation* (February 6, 1929): 164.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, review in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (March 30, 1929): 824, emphasis added. Dewey also accepted the Lynds' approach without reservation, blithely declaring Middletown to be Anytown and, in the process, endorsing the Lynds' refusal to examine those cultural issues arising from ethnic and racial, rather than economic, factors. John Dewey, *Individualism, Old and New* (New York, 1930), 45–49.

represented some objective confirmation of Lewisian social portraiture. He suggested that it was not true, as Mencken had claimed, that the Lynds "carried with them [to Middletown] no prepossessions and no thesis to prove." To the contrary, he asserted, the Lynds "tried honestly to verify or reject, by a study of an actual community, the impressions they had . . . derived" from "a literature of national introspection and the voluminous protest against the barrenness of American life." While it was "a brilliant intention" to use social science "to cut, for once, through the whole tissue of hypothesis, conjecture, intuition, and opinion" concerning the perilous condition of American civilization, it was a treacherous gamble that could not but fail. "The human mind tends to discover what it sets out to discover. If you set out to describe Middletown with a picture of Zenith indelibly in your mind, you will find that you have described Zenith after all."<sup>55</sup> The charge that the Lynds were working within a particular tradition of social criticism that profoundly shaped the interpretive character of *Middletown* could not have been leveled more directly.

INTELLECTUALS RARELY CONCEDED that their preoccupation with class division and capitalist culture was driven, at least in part, by their unease with what they saw as the irrational politics of ethnicity and race. Dewey was one of the few to confess to such discomfort (although he did it a safe 9,000 miles away from his New York home). Another was a longtime friend of Dewey's, the philosopher Horace Kallen. Prior to 1920, Kallen's voice had been among the strongest and most eloquent calling for cultural pluralism. In classes he taught at Harvard, the University of Wisconsin, and the New School for Social Research (of which he was a founding member) and in articles written for *The Nation*, the *Dial*, and the *New Republic*, Kallen argued against forced assimilation and for the celebration of ethnic difference. He imagined the American nation as an orchestra in which each ethnic group would have its own "theme and melody" and contribute a distinctive part to the "symphony of [American] civilization."<sup>56</sup> As a Jew and a Zionist, Kallen had a considerable personal stake in this pluralism; he wanted to create an American nation in which his people would find it possible both to declare their loyalty to America and remain true to their ancestral culture.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the depths of his commitment to Zionism and the politics of cultural pluralism, Kallen, too, was unprepared for the irrational ethnic fervor and cultural prejudice unleashed by World War I. He first encountered these forces within the Zionist movement itself, in the form of growing opposition to the practical, social democratic Zionism that he, along with Brandeis, Stephen Wise, and other prominent American Zionists, favored. This opposition, largely East

<sup>55</sup> Lerner, *New York Evening Post*, February 9, 1929.

<sup>56</sup> Kallen, "Democracy versus Melting Pot," in *The Nation*, February 18 and 25, 1915; reprinted in Horace M. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States: Group Psychology of the American Peoples* (New York, 1924), 67-125.

<sup>57</sup> For biographical background on Kallen, see Sarah Leff Schmidt, "Horace M. Kallen and the Americanization of Zionism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1973); on his Zionist views, see his exchange with Morris Cohen on ethnicity, Zionism, and liberalism in the *New Republic*, March 18 and April 5, 1919.

European in composition and led by Chaim Weizmann, stemmed from many factors, some of which turned on petty clashes over personality, status, and control. But Kallen and others in the Brandeisian camp became convinced that their opponents were in the grip of unrealistic and irrational passions. These East Europeans, in Kallen's view, would talk endlessly at meetings of their longings for Zion but then prove utterly inept at planning the establishment of an actual state. These same European Zionists were prone to expend precious funds meant for Palestine's economic development on frivolous cultural projects. They grew bored with discussions of establishing a "cooperative commonwealth" in Palestine and hostile to any Zionist who insisted on maintaining a dual identity. They regarded as reprehensible Brandeis's decision in 1919 to continue his career as an American Supreme Court justice rather than accept the presidency of the World Zionist Congress. By 1921, Kallen and others in Brandeis's camp had become so embittered by the East European camp's behavior that they withdrew from organized Zionist activity altogether. Kallen remained a Zionist at heart, but he would never again be the Zionist activist he had been from 1914 to 1921.<sup>58</sup>

If the East European Zionists represented one kind of cultural nightmare for Kallen, the Boston Irish represented another. Kallen had been an early and vociferous critic of the trial of the two Italian anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, accused in 1920 of murdering a South Braintree, Massachusetts, factory paymaster. Convinced of the anarchists' innocence, Kallen was baffled by their failure, despite many appeals for justice, to win a reprieve from execution. Kallen was not satisfied with the explanation favored by many liberal intellectuals, namely, that this case was a brutal example of class injustice, of the economically strong and their judicial allies punishing those brave souls who had dared to speak up for the nation's dispossessed. Kallen grew up in Boston, and in the 1920s he returned to it often, to work with the Sacco-Vanzetti defense committee. Kallen knew the city's political complexion well. He maintained that Sacco and Vanzetti could not have been executed without the full cooperation of the Irish political machine that controlled key posts of state and municipal government. Kallen blamed the Irish not only for the anarchists' execution but for introducing a climate of "fear and madness" to a state "which once had been the center of culture in the United States." This onetime cultural emporium had become, in his eyes, the nation's laughingstock through its repeated public and private efforts to ban "dangerous" books, plays, and speeches.<sup>59</sup> Kallen himself experienced the shame and silliness of this repression in 1928 when Boston police attempted to arrest him for calling Jesus Christ an anarchist. The case made

<sup>58</sup> On the split within the Zionist movement, see Ben Halpern, *A Clash of Heroes: Brandeis, Weizmann, and American Zionism* (New York, 1987). Kallen's book, *Zionism and World Politics* (New York, 1924), obscures more than it reveals about the bitter feud within Zionist ranks. Kallen's career as a Zionist, his growing disillusionment, and sharp break in 1921 with the movement can best be understood through Kallen's correspondence with Brandeis, Stephen Wise, Jacob de Haas, and other American Zionists in the years 1914 to 1921. See Box 4, Folders 10-11; Box 12, Folder 17; Box 31, Folder 22, Kallen Papers, AJC. Sarah Schmidt reproduces many of the critical letters in her Kallen dissertation cited above.

<sup>59</sup> See Horace M. Kallen, "Fear and Freedom: With Special Reference to the Madness of Massachusetts," unpublished manuscript of speech delivered by Kallen to the Open Forum in Baltimore, December 30, 1928, Box 72, Folder 2, Kallen Papers, AJC, pp. 19-20 in particular.

national headlines, drawing comparisons to the Tennessee Scopes Trial, when it became known that a Boston judge had charged Kallen under a 1640 Puritan blasphemy statute.<sup>60</sup>

Such behavior by the Boston Irish, Kallen concluded, could not be understood in terms of class analysis alone. The Irish political machine, backed by the church, may have been a wealthy institution, but its economic clout paled in comparison to that wielded by Boston's Brahmin financial elite. Moreover, it drew much of its support from Boston's large population of working-class Irish. Kallen turned somewhat reluctantly, therefore, to cultural analysis. Was there something about Irish culture, Kallen wondered, that encouraged intolerance? He toyed with the idea that Irish Catholicism harbored a puritanical streak that naturally inclined it to repression. He proposed a socioeconomic explanation that stressed how the hostile reception given the Irish immigrants by their Protestant hosts had damaged Irish culture in ways not easily repaired.<sup>61</sup> Each of these explanations raised serious questions about the desirability of pursuing a program of cultural pluralism. Kallen did not want an America in which the intolerant culture of the Irish—or the irrational culture of East European Zionists—was given license to flourish.

Kallen's encounter with Boston politics in 1927 and 1928 confirmed what had been bothering him since his break with Zionism in the early 1920s: the difficulty of achieving progress through cultural politics. Like many other liberal intellectuals of the age, he retreated to the economic realm. His writings began focusing almost entirely on the advent of machine civilization and its adverse effects on individuality and freedom. His political attention was increasingly drawn to the establishment of consumer and producer cooperatives, a guild socialist program that he believed would restore freedom and meaning to American life. By 1929, Kallen's "economic" approach to the problems of American society was indistinguishable from that of Dewey or the Lynds. That the American nation was an amalgam of various ethnic and racial communities, that the nation suffered from serious cultural tensions arising from group differences, that any progressive politics had to address itself to these cultural issues: such concerns, which had been central to Kallen's earlier thought, are rarely expressed in the many books and articles he published between the mid-1920s and the mid-1940s.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> See Box 72, Folders 3–5; Box 14, Folder 8, Kallen Papers, AJC. Kallen's blasphemous words, uttered at a Sacco-Vanzetti memorial meeting in August 1928, were: "if Sacco and Vanzetti were anarchists, Jesus Christ was an anarchist." The blasphemy statute read: "Whoever wilfully blasphemes the holy name of God by denying, cursing or contumeliously reproaching God, His creation, government or final judging of the world, or by cursing or contumeliously reproaching Jesus Christ or the Holy Ghost . . . shall be punished."

<sup>61</sup> Kallen, "Fear and Freedom," 16–19.

<sup>62</sup> The titles of Kallen's books in the years 1925 to 1944 are revealing: *Education, the Machine and the Worker* (1925); *Freedom in the Modern World* (1928); *Individualism: An American Way of Life* (1933); *A Free Society* (1934); *The Decline and Rise of the Consumer: A Philosophy of Consumer Cooperation* (1936); *Consumer Cooperation and the Freedom of Man* (1944). One book, *Frontiers of Hope* (New York, 1929), explored the situation of Jews in Russia and Palestine but pointedly refused to contemplate their condition in the United States. Another book, *Judaism at Bay: Essays toward the Adjustment of Judaism to Modernity* (New York, 1932), assembled seventeen essays that Kallen had written on Jewish or Zionist themes since 1909; most had been written by 1925.

Interest in Kallen is growing, a reflection of our current preoccupation with multiculturalism; yet most scholars seem unaware that Kallen abandoned his advocacy of cultural pluralism in the years



The work of the sociologist Robert Park and of his graduate students at the University of Chicago would seem to constitute an important exception to this pattern of silence and retreat on questions of ethnicity and race. Park's "Chicago School," after all, defined itself in the 1920s through its detailed investigations of ethnic and racial group life in American cities. Park elaborated his famous four-step race relations cycle in those years (all intergroup encounters began with innocent contacts, moved through periods of competition and accommodation, and culminated in assimilation), and, by the late 1920s, doctoral dissertations testing this model in case studies were accumulating in the University of Chicago library. Not only did Park confront the problems that other liberal intellectuals avoided, but events of the 1920s caused him to become more, rather than less, sanguine about the possibilities of inter-ethnic and interracial cooperation. Park's intellectual influence was immense, and his work, over the long term, contributed significantly to the discrediting of racism in scholarship and in politics. In the short term, however, his work actually reinforced the marginalization of ethnicity and race as issues of liberal social action.<sup>63</sup>

Park's work rested on a deep naturalism. Society, he believed, advanced through "natural" processes that did not respond well to political interventions. Human agency could alter prevailing social structures—the progress of Park's race relations cycle, in fact, depended on an oppressed racial or ethnic group mobilizing to demand fair treatment—but not if initiated by "do-gooders" who lacked an organic connection to the group whose cause they had embraced. All such artificial intrusions into evolutionary social processes—what Gunnar Myrdal would later hail as "social engineering"—simply frustrated, even reversed, the natural tendency toward harmony, equilibrium, and progress. Park rejected a prominent role for himself in the struggle for racial equality on precisely these grounds. He refused to use his academic prestige as a national soapbox from

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between the two world wars. See, for example, Werner Sollors, "A Critique of Pure Pluralism," in Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *Reconstructing American Literary History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 250–79; Moses Rischin, "The Jews and Pluralism: Toward an American Freedom Symphony," in Gladys Rosen, ed., *Jewish Life in America: Historical Perspectives* (New York, 1978); Michael Walzer, "What Does It Mean to Be an 'American'?" *Social Research*, 57 (Fall 1990): 591–614; Hollinger, "Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism, and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia"; Susanne Klingenstein, *Jews in the American Academy, 1900–1940: The Dynamics of Intellectual Assimilation* (New Haven, Conn., 1991); and Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York, 1964).

John Higham and Philip Gleason are among the few who have discerned in Kallen's interwar thought a retreat from pluralism, and Gleason alone has understood the depths and persistence of Kallen's anti-Catholicism, a hostility that originated, I would argue, in his experiences with the Boston Irish in the 1920s. See Higham, "Ethnic Pluralism in Modern American Thought," in John Higham, *Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York, 1975), 196–230; and Gleason, "The Odd Couple: Pluralism and Assimilation," and "Pluralism, Democracy, and Catholicism: Religious Tensions," in Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity: Language and Ethnicity in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, Md., 1992), 47–90, 207–28. See also Philip Gleason, "American Identity and Americanization," in Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, 43–47.

<sup>63</sup> On Park, see Fred H. Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology: Robert E. Park and the Chicago School* (Montreal, 1977); Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, 1991), chap. 9; Stow Persons, *Ethnic Studies at Chicago, 1905–45* (Urbana, Ill., 1987). Early dissertations written under Park's direction were Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago, 1928); and Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (Chicago, 1929).

which to agitate for civil rights. Although trained as a journalist, he generally declined to write on current events or to publish popular essays on questions of racial prejudice and discrimination. He limited his own political activity to local Chicago organizations, where he could justify his involvement as organic rather than intrusive. Throughout his life, he locked horns with racial liberals and radicals—W. E. B. Du Bois, Oswald Garrison Villard, Mary Ovington, and Gunnar Myrdal, among others—who fashioned for intellectuals a highly visible and interventionist political role. When mainstream liberals, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, began insisting on such intervention into racial matters, Park distanced himself from the liberal label and then, in 1943, rejected it altogether.<sup>64</sup>

Given Park's views on the role of intellectuals in politics, it is hardly surprising that his work did little to challenge prevailing liberal orthodoxies in 1920s America. Indeed, the lines of influence may have run in the opposite direction. Park came to share the conviction of other liberals that a global capitalist revolution had unleashed forces of enormous power. Unlike the Lynds, Park viewed this revolution positively ("a cosmic process"), for he believed it would generate "a vast unconscious cooperation of races and peoples" in matters of economic and social life. Even the most encrusted racial antagonisms would not withstand the solvent that the world-wide exchange of goods and culture would inject into international and interracial relations. Because of these economic developments, Park declared in 1926, "the race relations cycle . . . of contacts, competition, accommodation and eventual assimilation" had become "progressive and irreversible." All racial barriers, he now believed, would fall.<sup>65</sup> If Park differed from the Lynds in his evaluation of the social consequences of capitalist growth, he apparently shared their view that capitalism had rendered ethnic and racial antagonisms obsolete. His work offered no easily grasped alternative to those looking for an escape from the economically oriented discourse dominant in 1920s liberal thought.

WE ARE ACCUSTOMED TO THINKING OF the Great Depression as a terrible shock, as an event that caught the American people utterly unprepared. Many Americans undoubtedly experienced the 1929 crash in this way. Herbert Hoover, who in 1928 had spoken of the imminent abolition of poverty in the United States, certainly did; so, too, did the many poor souls who had sunk their meager life savings into Florida real estate scams.

The experience of American liberals, however, was different. To them, the

<sup>64</sup> Matthews, *Quest for an American Sociology*, 76–77, 81–82, 189; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York, 1944), 2: 1049–57. Park's views on political action owed a great deal to Booker T. Washington (with whom he was once closely associated) and to the "naturalism" of his fellow sociologist and colleague William Fielding Ogburn. Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*, is very good on the growing influence of naturalism and "scientism" on Park's work.

<sup>65</sup> "Customs regulations, immigration restrictions and racial barriers," Park continued, "may slacken the tempo of the movement; may perhaps halt it altogether for a time; but cannot change its direction; cannot at any rate, reverse it." See Park, "Our Racial Frontier in the Pacific," and "Behind Our Masks," in Robert E. Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), 138–51, 244–55; originally published in *Survey Graphic*, 56 (May 1926): 192–96, 135–39, respectively.

Depression came as no great intellectual shock; unlike World War I, it triggered no crisis of faith, nor did it require a fundamental reevaluation of liberal politics. The beliefs we associate with New Deal liberals—that the capitalist economy was dangerously unbalanced in terms of its distribution of power, that machine civilization had spun out of control—were well established among liberals in the 1920s. Nor did liberal intellectuals need to sweep their agendas clear of “annoying” or “distracting” cultural issues such as racial or religious discrimination in order to focus on pressing economic matters, for this intellectual work had been largely completed by the mid-1920s. Because questions of ethnicity and race had been effectively marginalized, liberals found it easy—remarkably easy—to exclude ethnics and blacks from their representations of the critical New Deal constituencies of workers, farmers, and small businessmen.

The way in which liberal intellectuals and reformers defined membership in the American “folk” reveals the marginality of ethnicity and race in 1930s discourse. The 1930s concept of the “folk” or the “people” referred to Americans, past and present, whose freedom from capitalist contamination endowed them with the strength to endure the Depression and to inspire the fight for cultural and political renewal. Liberals might have found such “folk” in ethnic communities (as the social historian Herbert Gutman would later do), where bonds of religion, language, and customs insulated community members from the worst effects of the market. But liberals rarely thought in these terms. Their “folk” were usually native-born Yankees or white southerners whose families, over the course of generations, had sunk deep roots into *American* soil. The degree to which an American pastoral ideal shaped representations of the “people” during this decade of industrial collapse can scarcely be exaggerated. The Depression era’s most celebrated photograph was Dorothea Lange’s searing 1936 portrait of the worn but proud, simple but virtuous “Migrant Mother” in transit from Oklahoma to California. The popularity of Lange’s visual image was matched in print by John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), an epic tale of the flight of the gallant Joad family after machines had entered and ravaged their rural Eden; and it was rivaled in film by Frank Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), both fables of simple, small-town Yankee men (played, respectively, by Gary Cooper and Jimmy Stewart, both actors with impeccable “Yankee” credentials), armed with little more than their honesty and common sense, vanquishing the corrupt and evil forces spawned by urban, machine civilization. As the case of Capra illustrates, these Yankee/yeoman representations of the American folk were often the work of individuals who were themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer’s Life* (New York, 1978), 132–36; Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, 1973), 215–19; James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1989), xi, 10, *passim*; Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York, 1992). The virtually complete absence of references to ethnicity or race in Warren Susman’s encyclopedic essays on 1930s culture further underscores my point. See Susman, “The Culture of the Thirties,” and “Culture and Commitment,” in his *Culture as History*, 150–211.

Artists and intellectuals of the decade actually did assemble considerable material on racial and ethnic minorities (one outstanding example being the WPA [Work Projects Administration] interviews with ex-slaves), archives that present-day historians are using to render a far more complex

A similar exclusion of race and ethnicity was apparent in the representation of American labor. The dominant working-class iconographic image of those years—the strapping Anglo-Saxon male, chest bared and muscles flexed—offered no hint of the cultural diversity of the American working class. Official labor movement documents, ranging from union newspapers and organizing buttons and banners to the public statements of union leaders, were customarily silent on the ethnic and racial composition of the American working class. These documents stressed the Americanism of the labor movement and commonly depicted workers as the descendants not of African slaves or European peasants but of heroic Yankees: Pilgrims, Minute Men, Founding Fathers, westward-trekking pioneers. The labor economists who designed and administered the industrial relations machinery of the New Deal state—individuals such as William Leiserson and David Saposs—made no effort to measure the influence of ethnic factors on labor disputes, even though this subject had been, in the 1910s and early 1920s, one of their chief concerns.<sup>67</sup>

If the exclusion of race and ethnicity from these “folk” and “labor” representations was easily effected, owing to the strength of the liberal tradition born in the aftermath of World War I, it also became increasingly strange. Liberal political power in the 1930s rested, after all, on the millions of urban ethnic workers who had committed themselves to organized labor and the Democratic Party. And while these mobilized millions did not call their movement a crusade for ethnic or minority rights, they were nevertheless eager to eliminate racial and religious discrimination from American life. The same was true of the rapidly growing number of Jewish and Catholic reformers whom Roosevelt welcomed into the ranks of New Deal policy makers.

In time, these socio-political developments might have caused the liberal tradition of the 1920s and 1930s to decompose or to be gradually transmuted into another liberalism more expressive of the aspirations of those who constituted its social base. But a series of events, beginning with the rise of Nazism, continuing with World War II, and concluding with the Cold War, ensured that the transformation of liberalism would be swift and deeply unsettling. That transformation entailed yet another reconfiguration of the liberal tradition.

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portrait of 1930s society and culture; but this material had almost no effect on liberal perceptions of the American “folk” and “people” at the time. For example, none of the WPA ex-slave interviews were published during the 1930s, and most received no scholarly or popular attention before the late 1960s. See George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972), Vol. 1 of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, George P. Rawick, gen. ed., 12 vols. (Westport, Connecticut, 1972– ), xiii–xxi. For current uses of other long-neglected archival material from the 1930s, see Ann Banks, *First-Person America* (New York, 1980); C. Stewart Doty, *Acadian Hard Times: The Farm Security Administration in Maine's St. John Valley, 1940–1943* (Orono, Me., 1991); and Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C., 1991).

<sup>67</sup> On the construction of 1930s Americanism, see Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*, chap. 5. On the labor economists' earlier interest in ethnicity, see William Leiserson, *Adjusting Immigrant and Industry* (New York, 1924); David J. Saposs, “The Immigrant in the Labor Movement,” *Modern Quarterly*, 3 (February–April 1926): 119–24; David J. Saposs Papers, MSS 113, Boxes 21 and 22 in particular, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

HITLER'S RISE TO POWER in one of the world's most technologically and culturally advanced societies directly challenged two convictions that had sustained American liberalism since the early 1920s: first, that the taming of capitalism was the preeminent problem confronting industrial societies and, second, that issues of racial and ethnic discrimination were best left alone or addressed indirectly, through programs of economic reform. The terrifying popularity of Nazi racist doctrines forced American liberals to reconsider their "hands-off" approach to problems of religious bigotry and racial hatred. These problems were not "secondary"; they were themselves primary. Their distinctive roots had to be exposed, their baneful influence combated. Racism and prejudice had to become subjects of political commentary and targets of social action.

This confrontation with Nazism induced a shift in liberal sensibilities that was, in the 1930s, subtle but would, in the 1940s, achieve seismic proportions. The magnitude of this shift can be discerned in the outpouring of books on racial problems and religious prejudice during the 1940s. Causes that had languished on the liberal agenda—civil rights, Zionism, and immigration reform—were now embraced. Reinhold Niebuhr, the Protestant theologian who would have a large influence on post-World War II liberalism, excoriated his fellow liberals in 1942 for thinking that the distribution of property was a more fundamental cause of social division and conflict than were racial and ethnic differences. Gunnar Myrdal's book *An American Dilemma*, a massive sociological study of black America published in 1944, received the kind of acclaim that liberals had bestowed on the Lynds' *Middletown* fifteen years earlier. And, in 1948, the Democratic Party, for the first time in its history (prodded by a new organization of liberals, Americans for Democratic Action, led by, among others, a young Hubert Humphrey and a young Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.) formally committed itself to civil rights. Although concerns with class division and the ill effects of capitalist civilization did not disappear from the liberal agenda, they lost their primacy. The intensification of the Cold War pushed these issues further to the periphery; in some portions of the liberal community, they were banished altogether. Here, in the 1940s, are the roots of 1960s liberalism, a liberalism very different in language, tone, and content from the one espoused by a pre-World War I Herbert Croly or an interwar John Dewey.<sup>68</sup>

One constant, however, was the liberal commitment to rationality. The shock of Nazism proved politically decisive because it coincided with an emerging conviction among liberals that rational social action *could* remedy ethnic and racial hostilities. The growing sophistication of the social sciences provided the osten-

<sup>68</sup> See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defence* (New York, 1944); and Niebuhr, "Jews after the War," *The Nation*, February 21 and 28, 1942; William S. Bernard, ed., *American Immigration Policy: A Reappraisal* (New York, 1950); Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*; Steven M. Gillon, *Politics and Vision: The ADA and American Liberalism, 1947-1985* (New York, 1987); Carey McWilliams, *Brothers under the Skin* (Boston, 1951); Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence, Kan., 1973). On the decline of class in post-World War II liberal politics, see Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," and Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?" both in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J., 1989), 122-52, 185-211.

sible rationale for this new-found confidence. Many liberals believed that their contributions to New Deal policy making and to war mobilization proved their capacity for social engineering on the grandest scale. No problem was too great for them to handle. The discovery of new methods and the accumulation of new knowledge allowed them to tackle social problems, such as prejudice, whose irrational nature had frustrated reformers in the past. The 1940s emergence of social psychology as a serious field of intellectual inquiry was the outstanding example of social science's expanding purview.<sup>69</sup>

Yet it would be a mistake to think that the territory of liberal social action was simply expanding in all directions, an objective correlate of a marked increase in social knowledge. Instead, liberals were reconstituting the realms of the rational and the irrational. As they were defining issues of ethnicity and race as appropriate targets of rational social action, they were beginning to treat class politics as an expression of irrationality. Class politics increasingly meant mass politics—a politics in which a mass of isolated individuals, desperate to overcome the loneliness that modernity had thrust upon them, gave their support to a party, a demagogue, or a movement that promised them community, purpose, meaning. In so doing, these individuals became pawns in the hands of tyrants such as Joseph Stalin and complicit in ideologies and politics that were irrational and dangerous. Democracy could never work in such circumstances.

Liberals had dreaded the "irrational mass" since World War I, but only in the 1940s did they come to think that class issues, more than cultural issues, were likely to stir the slumbering masses to irrational action. This shift from culture to class reflected a reevaluation of communism in light of the Stalinist terror and the outbreak of the Cold War. While liberals had feared the ruthlessness of Russia's Bolshevik rulers in the 1920s and 1930s, they had also admired their use of social intelligence and their commitment to social planning. Many liberals, in fact, hoped to introduce a similar kind of rational, technocratic rule—appropriately democratized, of course—to America.<sup>70</sup> By the late 1940s, however, Soviet collectivism was no longer seen as embodying rationally organized intelligence or as expressing society's best hopes for liberation; it was viewed as totalitarian, as a brutal kind of despotism that thrived on modern man's desperate loneliness and overwhelming need, in Erich Fromm's memorable phrase, to escape his freedom. Although this theory arose as an effort to comprehend both Nazism and communism, to make sense of regimes of terror built on race hatred and class hatred, it was communism that, in the context of the Cold War, seemed to present the far greater danger. The Soviet state, unlike the Nazi state, had endured; its international power and prestige were rising. Thus liberal fears of extreme and irrational behavior—of "the totalitarian psychosis," to use Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s phrase—came to focus on problems originating in class division and the deracinating effects of industrialization more than in ethnic or racial difference.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York, 1976), part 1; Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience*, chap. 7; Robin M. Williams, Jr., *The Reduction of Intergroup Tensions: A Survey of Research on Problems of Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Group Relations* (New York, 1947).

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Stuart Chase, Robert Dunn, and Rexford G. Tugwell, eds., *Soviet Russia in the Second Decade* (New York, 1928).

<sup>71</sup> Paraphrasing Fromm, Schlesinger wrote: "The psychological stigmata of the fugitives from

If the history of Soviet Communism—its longevity, its terror, its growing international power—caused liberals anxiety about class politics, the recent history of ethnic relations in America inspired hope. Liberals observed that hatreds among European ethnics—between Catholics and Jews, white Protestants and Catholics, the Irish and Italians—had softened since the 1910s through a long-term process of assimilation. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, ethnic feeling seemed much less reactionary and irrational than it had in the 1920s; ethnic differences, moreover, seemed less potent and thus less threatening to the American sense of nationhood. Problems of prejudice and discrimination could be safely addressed. Horace Kallen could now listen to his multi-ethnic orchestra perform an American symphony without fear that a few players, by refusing their assigned roles, would interrupt a beautiful melody with an ear-splitting screech.<sup>72</sup> Some liberals even began hailing the cultural vigor of different ethnic groups as vital to American democracy. Such pluralism, or what Oscar Handlin called “group life within the American pattern,” provided assurance that American society would not be devastated by communism or some other form of mass politics. “A democratic society, based on a genuine cultural pluralism,” Schlesinger wrote in 1949, “could go far to supply outlets for the variegated emotions of man, and thus restore meaning to democratic life.” By the late 1940s, liberals were writing as though ethnicity were a repository for healthy, and rational, human sentiments; class, by contrast, was treated as a pit of irrational and dangerous passion.<sup>73</sup> The change in liberal perspective from the 1920s could hardly have been more startling.

And yet the influence of the Great War and the Russian Revolution was still manifest. Liberals of the 1940s, like those of the 1920s, were determined to demarcate a “rational” realm in which the pursuit of freedom would unfold in an orderly and reasonable way. Only by asserting this kind of control over the process of emancipation could they sustain their belief in the positive and progressive character of reform.

THIS STRATEGY, I have tried to show, suffered from an inescapable instability. On the one hand, external events such as the rise of Nazism periodically compelled liberals to address “irrational” issues, such as racial bigotry, that they preferred to ignore. On the other hand, the reform movements they embraced often chal-

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freedom . . . are the strivings for submission and for domination, the losing of self in masochism or sadism.” *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston, 1949), 53, 85; Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, 1941); Will Herberg, “Personalism against Totalitarianism,” *Politics*, 2 (December 1945): 369–74; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951); Alonzo L. Hamby, “The Vital Center, the Fair Deal, and the Quest for a Liberal Political Economy,” *AHR*, 77 (June 1972): 653–78.

<sup>72</sup> Horace M. Kallen, “‘E Pluribus Unum’ and the Cultures of Democracy,” *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 16 (February 1943): 329–32; Higham, “Ethnic Pluralism in Modern American Thought.”

<sup>73</sup> Oscar Handlin, “Group Life within the American Pattern,” *Commentary*, 8 (November 1949): 411–17; Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 253; Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York, 1955). In his seminal 1951 work on interest group politics, David B. Truman treated class politics as a form of “pathogenic politics.” Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York, 1951), 523.

lenged the cherished liberal values of order and reason. The very nature of emancipation prompted individuals to throw off constraints, rules, and procedures; in a "war for democracy," a crusade for cultural pluralism, or a labor uprising, activists often crossed the line that liberals had drawn between rational and irrational, orderly and disorderly, behavior. When that occurred, liberals were compelled to rethink the categories of the "rational" and "irrational" and to construct a new realm of rational social action on the ruins of the old. Their 1940s redefinition of what constituted "rational" and "irrational" behavior reveals the contingent, even arbitrary, manner in which they accomplished this task. As their delineation of the rational changed, so, too, did their sense of what politics could and could not accomplish and of which problems seemed suitable for reform and which were best ignored. As a result of this maneuvering, American liberalism was periodically stretched, altered, and reborn.

What American liberalism lacked in ideological coherence and integrity, it gained in political durability. Virtually everywhere outside the United States, liberal movements and parties collapsed as a result of the Great War, their prominent place and influence taken by radical movements of the left and right. Only in the United States did liberalism survive and thrive, in no small measure because of the willingness and ability of American liberals to reconfigure their creed.

Only in the 1960s did liberals experience a crisis that proved too great for them to handle. They were unprepared for the racial hatred that the advances of the civil rights movement unleashed among whites. Liberals could neither dissolve this hatred through social policy nor abandon their commitment to racial equality. The constraints imposed by the Cold War prevented them from resurrecting class politics as a safe terrain on which to fight their reform battles. Liberals were unprepared as well for the radical youth movements that glorified complete liberation from social restraints while relentlessly exposing the inconsistencies of the liberal commitment to emancipation. Young radicals also targeted the repressive consequences of the liberal obsession with rationality. Never before had liberals suffered such a direct assault on their foundational principles, and it left them confused, dazed, and divided, without the will or strength to reconstitute the realms of the rational and irrational, to restore the reform process to a supervised path, or to reassert their notion of controlled emancipation. American liberalism has never been the same.