



IRA KATZNELSON

Author of *When Affirmative Action Was White*

FEAR ITSELF

The New Deal and
the Origins of Our Time

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The New Deal

AND THE

Origins of Our Time

藏书章

IRA KATZNELSON



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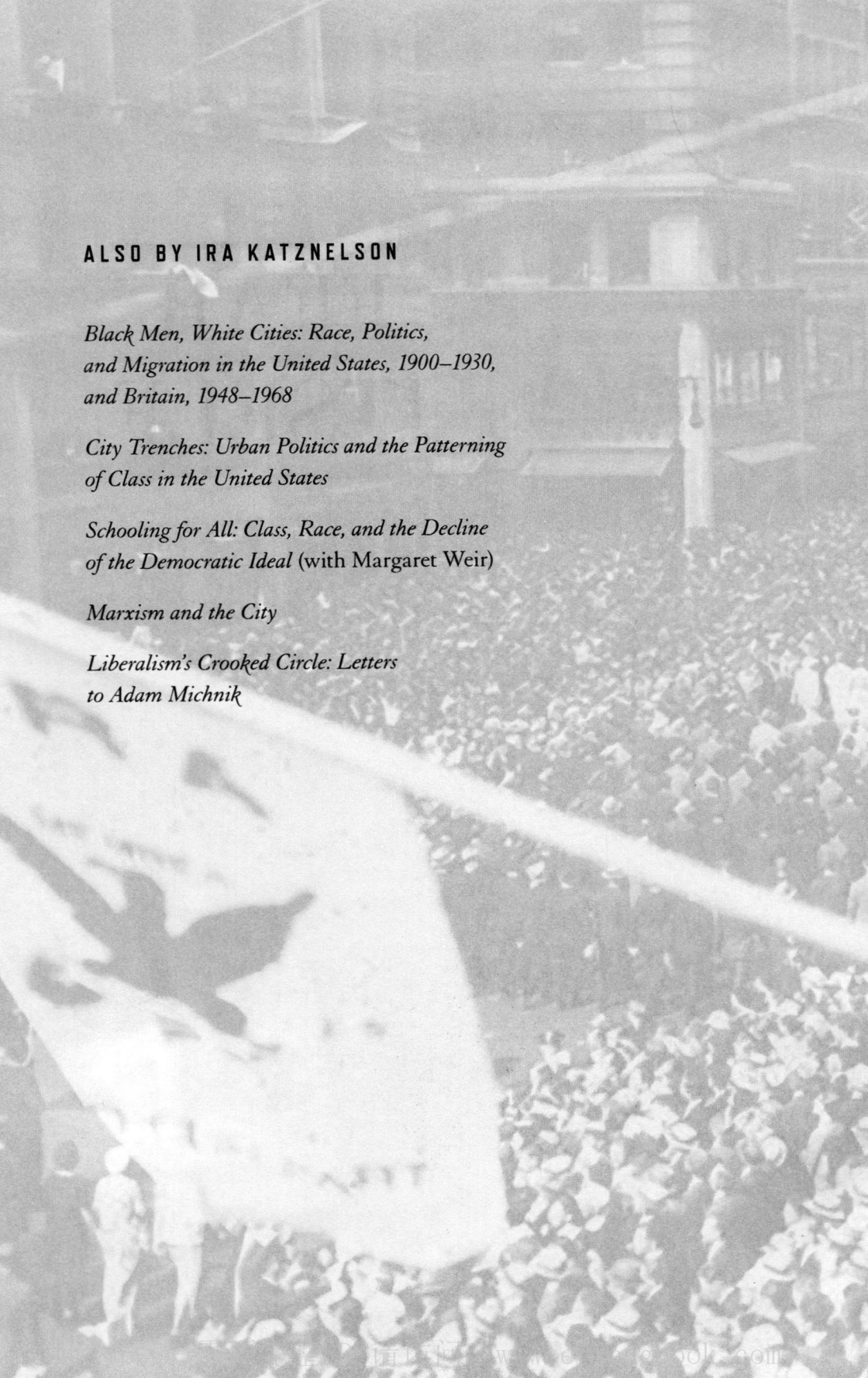
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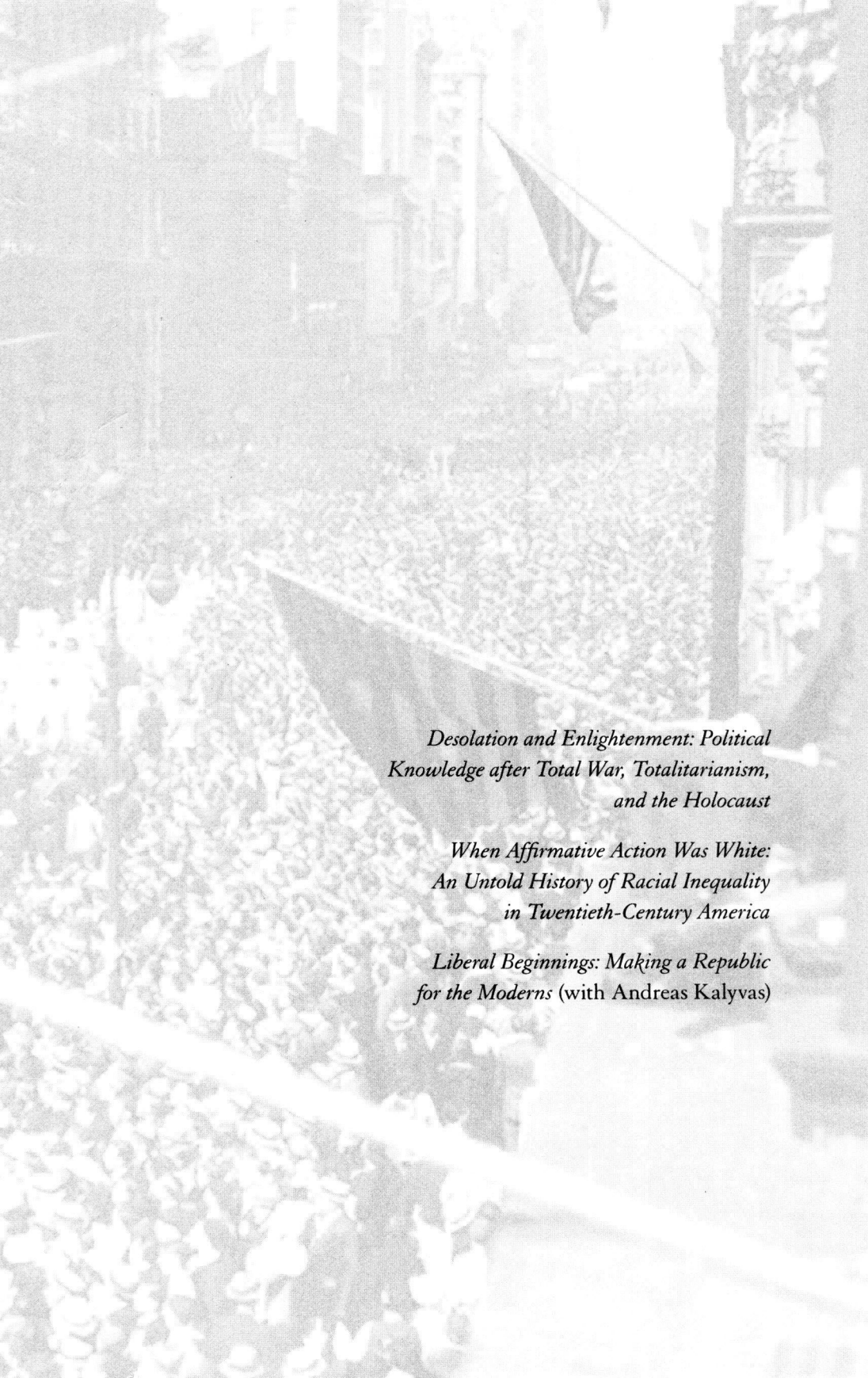
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■

*For Deborah, and her
ever-expanding bounty*

■

I live in an age of fear.

■

E.B. White, letter to the
New York Herald Tribune,
November 29, 1947

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FEAR ITSELF

INTRODUCTION Triumph and Sorrow



LESS THAN A YEAR after Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency, Charles Beard, the nation's leading historian, reported how, "with astounding profusion, the presses are pouring out books, pamphlets, and articles on the New Deal."¹ Ever since Beard's observation, copious attention has been paid to how the Roosevelt and Truman administrations brought energy to despair.² Indeed, we possess hundreds of thematic histories, countless studies of public affairs, and abundant biographies of key persons during this time of great

historical density. Scholars and journalists have exhaustively analyzed the epoch's increasingly powerful bureaucracy, the Supreme Court as it evolved, the thicket of policies concerning economic regulation and social welfare, and the country's growing military capacity and global leadership. Their resonant pages emphasize the character, the actions, and prose of its two presidents—one mesmerizing, larger than life, the other plain but not simple. They are crowded with other grand characters we have come to know well, including the grandiloquent union leader, John L. Lewis; the lanky congressman and senator from Texas, Lyndon Baines Johnson; the erudite African-American scholar and activist, W. E. B. Du Bois; and a colorful parade of spies and spy catchers, radio preachers and generals, atomic scientists and war-crimes lawyers.

With the protean twenty-year epoch of Democratic Party rule long understood as “a watershed . . . that separates politics past from politics present and future,” why present another portrait of the New Deal? Is there anything new to be said about this “defining time—like the Revolution and the establishment of the new nation—that set . . . the terms of American politics and government for generations to come”?³

I.

DRAWN TO the mystery and beauty of Venice, Henry James set numerous sketches, stories, and novels in that city, “where the mere use of one’s eyes . . . is happiness enough.”⁴ Writing in 1882 as “a brooding tourist,” he cautioned that “an originality of attitude is completely impossible.” After all, the “golden” city had been “painted and described many thousands of times,” and there was “nothing new to be said.” With “as little mystery about the Grand Canal as about our local thoroughfare, and the name of St. Mark . . . as familiar as the postman’s ring,” James conceded that there was “a certain impudence in pretending to add anything.”⁵

James defended his depiction. “It is not forbidden . . . to speak of familiar things” or present “a fillip to . . . memory” when a writer “is himself in love with his theme.”⁶ One reason for writing is just such veneration. The New Deal—the designation I use for the full period of Democratic Party rule that begins with FDR’s election in 1932 and closes with Dwight Eisenhower’s two decades later—reconsidered and rebuilt the country’s long-established

political order. In so doing, it engaged in a contest with the dictatorships, of both the Right and the Left, about the validity of liberal democracy. Bleak uncertainty marked most of these years. By successfully defining and securing liberal democracy, the New Deal offers the past century's most striking example of how a democracy grappled with fear-generating crises.

A gloom of incomparable force was setting in when the New Deal began. In July 1932, Benito Mussolini celebrated, if prematurely, how "the liberal state is destined to perish." Reporting how "worn out" constitutional democracies had been "deserted by the peoples who feel [it will] lead the world to ruin," he boasted, in prose ghostwritten by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, that "all the political experiments of our day are antiliberal."⁷ The New Deal's rearrangement of values and institutions, and its support for the Western liberal political tradition, answered this challenge. Its battles were fought on many fronts, from the effort to revive capitalism to the struggle to incorporate the working class and contain the dangerous features of a mass society. Its international objectives were no less weighty, from the mission to defeat Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and militarist Japan to the desire to keep Soviet Communism in check, while maintaining internal solidarity and security in the process. These achievements are especially impressive when one realizes that they had to be accomplished virtually all at once, like a galloping Thoroughbred carrying not one rider but four.

From the early days of the New Deal, the democratic world watched with great curiosity. Many were convinced that there was a nearly perfect coincidence between the particular causes of the United States and the universal causes of humanity.⁸ Five months to the day after FDR's inauguration, Jawaharlal Nehru saluted the president for coming to democracy's rescue from a New Delhi British prison cell.⁹ In a December 1933 letter sent to Roosevelt, John Maynard Keynes affirmed, "You have made yourself the trustee for those in every country who seek to mend the evils of our condition by reasoned experiment within the framework of the existing social system."¹⁰ "Our generation," the German novelist Stefan Zweig, who would later commit suicide in exile in Brazil, observed, "grew up in the ardent, inflexible faith in the mission of Europe. . . . Though Europe has now proved so shamefully false to its most sacred mission, has destroyed itself in wanton self-laceration, though individual countries have made of moral irresponsibility a doctrine and of brutality a creed, we shall not be false to our faith. We shall place our

trust in the youth of younger countries—America above all; it is for them to save the freedom of the mind, the humanity of the heart, for the world.”¹¹

This trust was not misplaced. The New Deal ultimately proved Mussolini wrong. The Gods of liberalism did not die. The dictatorships’ vortex of violence and brutality was not only met but also trumped by a model of constitutionalism and law. Of the New Deal’s many achievements, none was more important than the demonstration that liberal democracy, a political system with a legislature at its heart, could govern effectively in the face of great danger.¹² In a decisive break with the old, the New Deal intentionally crafted not just a new set of policies but also new forms of institutional meaning, language, and possibility for a model that had been invented 150 years before.¹³ By buttressing the country’s constitutional order despite the many frustrations inherent in its separation of powers and federal organization, the New Deal demonstrated that not all attempts at nonrevolutionary reform need fail.¹⁴

These achievements were widely recognized, almost immediately so. The editors of *The New Republic* reviewed the New Deal’s panoply of policies in May 1940. They persuasively judged the first two Roosevelt administrations “to have done far more for the general welfare of the country and its citizens than any administration in the previous history of the nation.”¹⁵ That year, a twenty-nine-year-old graduate student by the name of Hubert Humphrey, completing a master’s degree in political science at Louisiana State University, noted how much had been accomplished by “refusing to be bound by time-worn ideas as to the function of the state.”¹⁶ Likewise, the historian E. H. Carr observed the same year that the New Deal’s program of reform had created a “vital democracy” as a global model.¹⁷ A decade later, the best-selling author John Gunther praised the New Deal for accomplishing “one of the few gradualist revolutions in history,” with “profound emotional results in lifting up the mental climate of most of the nation, stirring citizens to new hope and faith.”¹⁸ Looking backward, Oxford’s Isaiah Berlin remarked in 1955 how “Mr. Roosevelt’s example strengthened democracy everywhere—that is to say, the view that the promotion of social justice and individual liberty does not necessarily mean the end of all efficient government.”¹⁹

By transcending the limits of traditional liberalism, conservatism, and orthodox socialism to take effective decisions on democracy’s behalf, the