Radical Visions & American Dreams

Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years

Richard H. Pells

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PREFACE TO THE WESLEYAN PAPERBACK EDITION

When this book first appeared in 1973, the pursuit of intellectual history had grown vaguely disreputable. A new generation of social historians, addicted to both the quasi-populist sentiments of the 1960s and the revelations presumably embedded in their computer print-outs, regarded the study of intellectuals as an antiquated, impressionistic, and unforgivably elitist enterprise. "Culture," they sermonized, should no longer be considered simply a matter of books and ideas. Rather, historians ought to embrace the latest enthusiasms of sociologists and anthropologists, which meant immersing themselves in the "hard" data buried in census reports, tax records, population shifts, and longevity cycles, all in an effort to illuminate the ways ordinary people actually lived. From this perspective, culture meant neither serious literature nor formal social criticism, nor even the less exalted yearnings of the media to entertain and sporadically instruct the masses. Instead, if one wanted to explore the culture of a given period, one needed to concentrate on household furnishings, articles of clothing, food consumption, patterns of child-rearing—with an occasional reference to a religious hymn or folk ballad of the sort that might lend some coherence to the otherwise unintelligible mutterings of the "inarticulate."

Intellectual historians themselves scurried to repent. Throughout the 1970s, they held conferences and published essays acknowledging the irrelevance of high culture and good writing. In the age of postmodernism, structuralism, deconstructionism, and other fashionable profundities, many agonized over the need for new methodologies and more meaningful typologies, anything that would keep the intellectual historian from being branded irrevocably as "conventional."

Obviously, my book ignored these trends. Whether out of innocence or perversity, I adopted an elementary method and principle of selec-

tion: I wrote about the people I could stand to read. That is what most historians do—even those of the quantifying persuasion—but few (including me, at the time) make such a confession in print for fear of sounding subjective and, even worse, unscientific. Nevertheless, this book appears to have outlasted my original discretion, so upon its republication I am indecently proud not only that it focused exclusively on intellectuals but also that it restricted its focus to those intellectuals I was interested in.

As to the subject itself, the strengths and weaknesses of America's radical writers and artists in the 1930s, I have not at this point much of importance to add. I continue to look upon the 1930s as a decade of extraordinary cultural and political creativity, most of it eventually undercut by external pressures, factional feuding, and the conservative implications of radical ideas. I wish the concluding paragraphs were not quite so hortatory, but like every author lurching toward a final sentence, I had to end the book somehow.

The present reader should bear in mind that this was a first book, with all the characteristic stigmata of first books. I now think it is a bit too cautious in its opinions, too solemn in its style, and too full of sentences with three clauses (like this one). But if I were to undertake a massive revision—a horrifying impulse I instantaneously repressed—I would change neither its argument nor its approach.

Which is another way of saying that, whatever its deficiencies, the book offered as broad and as comprehensive an interpretation of what American intellectuals in the 1930s wrote and thought as I could manage in 1973. A decade later, I still feel reasonably satisfied that it serves the purposes for which it was intended.

—RICHARD H. PELLS
April 1984

INTRODUCTION

If the writing of history is not only a means of understanding the past but also a form of communication to the present, then few historical episodes better illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of modern American life than the experience of the Great Depression. The 1930s was a time in which many of the tensions that still afflict our culture and society were most dramatically revealed. The ability of American political institutions to respond to a crisis of unprecedented proportions, the effort to find effective remedies for a sick economy, the fervent desire to experiment with new types of artistic expression, the growing importance of the mass media and popular culture, the very capacity of ordinary men and women to adapt to change while still preserving intact some of their basic ideals, all these were central issues with which Americans wrestled throughout the decade. More important, the way in which such dilemmas were resolved (or ultimately evaded) continues to have important consequences for the kind of society we live in today. Thus any effort to re-examine the conflicts and passions of the 1930s becomes, inevitably, a commentary on contemporary problems as well.

The present study attempts to explore the impact of the depression on American culture and social thought. More specifically, it focuses on the efforts of a number of leading American intellectuals to discover alternatives to those political beliefs, economic institutions, social values, and artistic preoccupations that had dominated the nation prior to 1929. In this enterprise, many writers and artists hoped to persuade their fellow citizens

that the American people could never be adequately fed or clothed or housed or employed as long as they continued to rely on a capitalist economy, that the United States must break at last with the liberal tradition both politically and philosophically, that an individualistic and competitive value system had become not only obsolete but inherently destructive to the nation's social and psychic stability, and that the country desperately needed a new literature, a new theater, and a new cinema in order to bring all of these changes about. These ideas led in turn to an intensification of the intellectual's desire to overcome his historic isolation from public affairs, to make his essays and novels and plays and films more meaningful in the lives of ordinary people, to devise a realistic program and strategy for democratic socialism, to create a new spirit of community and cooperation throughout the land, and to help inspire a genuine political and cultural revolution that would transform the lives of every American.

Nevertheless, though their intentions were innovative and radical, it is possible to see (particularly in the years after 1935) an underlying conservatism in their outlook as well as in the implications of their ideas. Many of the positions developed in the early 1930s could be used either to change or to reinforce the existing culture and social structure; the latter tendency became more pronounced during the closing years of the decade. It is my contention, then, that intellectuals in the 1930s were both radical and conservative, ideologically sophisticated and hostile to social theory, artistically experimental but also hungry for popular acceptance, at once critical and supportive of traditional American ideals. In the end, however, these contradictions were by no means unique to the depression experience; they are at the very center of the American intellectual's continuing ambivalence toward his native land.

Every author brings to his subject certain controlling questions and concerns, and these frequently determine what material will be used and which ideas will be emphasized. In my own case, I wished to investigate the depression experience not only as a crisis for American culture and society but also as an opportunity to discuss some more general issues that have plagued intellectual life in the twentieth century. If I could offer no solutions, I wanted at least to deal with the continuing problems of the role of the writer in American society, the relationship of art to politics and ideology, the connections between reform and revolution, the effort to build a democratic mass movement which could still remember its radical objectives, the inevitable tensions between cultural rebellion and social change. At the same time I felt it necessary to explore not only the programs and

ideas of literary critics and media theorists but also to find out what themes and values were actually being portrayed in the novels, plays, and films of the period. Finally, I wanted to examine the 1930s as a test case for the strengths and weaknesses, the contributions and failures of American radicalism in the modern world.

As a result of these preoccupations, I decided to deal primarily with the ideas of writers and artists who were generally associated with the Left. It was not my purpose, however, to discuss once again the factional intrigues of various radical groups, nor to engage in another debate about the influence of the Communist party on intellectuals; this has been done elsewhere and perhaps at excessive length. Moreover, because I was more interested in what was actually written during the period (rather than in the second thoughts of the decade's survivors) and because I believe that what intellectuals write for public consumption is more important than what movements they join or what petitions they sign, the work pays less attention to organizational activities, private correspondence, and subsequent memoirs than to those sources which appeared in the decade itself: journal articles, books, novels, plays, and films. Above all, I wished to avoid as much as possible the traditional categories of analysis, to ask new questions about the nature of the decade's political and cultural commitments, to assess the significance of issues like planning, the search for community, the fascination with symbols and myths, the desire for a counter-culture and a counter-morality different from those of the middle class, the strain of existentialism that seemed to underly the period's radical façade.

Given the assumptions and purposes of the book, certain principles of selection followed. For the most part, I would concentrate on those writers and artists who most effectively presented the ideas or advanced the arguments with which I was especially concerned. At the same time, I tried to remain faithful to what seemed the major preoccupations of the intellectual community itself during the 1930s, and so I focused on those themes and issues that continually reappeared in the works of art and the social criticism of the decade. In sum, I sought to analyze statements that were representative or influential, as well as those that best revealed the central values of the period. Thus I traced the debate over concepts like planning and the changing attitudes toward the New Deal and the Soviet Union as they emerged in the magazines and books of the 1930s. But I also dealt at length with certain works which, while they were not necessarily widely read or discussed at the time, still served as characteristic expressions of the decade's intellectual mood: Robert Lynd's *Knowledge for What?*, Mordecai

Gorelik's *New Theatres For Old,* the novels of Daniel Fuchs, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*

But no matter how inclusive I attempted to be, there remained several important but unavoidable omissions. Some intellectual tendencies were excluded because they did not seem to reflect or have an impact on the ideas of those writers under consideration. Thus there is little mention of Keynesian theory, nor any discussion of the European emigrés who fled from fascism to the United States in the 1930s; both these movements exerted a more visible effect on American thought during and after World War II. Similarly, though I analyzed the extent to which the Southern Agrarians and the New Critics shared certain assumptions in common with their antagonists on the left, I did not deal with conservative social critics such as Walter Lippmann and Lawrence Dennis, whom radicals largely ignored. For the same reasons, I chose to neglect trends within the academic community. Most of the writers and artists whom I studied had no official relationship to the universities, and their ideas developed outside the formal disciplines of history, economics, or sociology. Finally, some figures simply did not fit into any category on which I was relying. Hence playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill as well as novelists such as John O'Hara, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe are briefly cited but not extensively evaluated; for these omissions I have only regret.

Behind the author's methodology, however, lies his basic attitude toward the subject. My own feeling is that the 1930s raised crucial questions which we have not yet satisfactorily answered, that many of its economic ideas and works of art were genuinely creative, and that the ultimate failure to construct an alternative culture and social philosophy has left tragic consequences for the intellectual and political life of the country in the years after 1945. As a result, we are left to grapple not only with the meaning of the depression experience but also with its legacy to our own time.

There are several people who have been extremely important in influencing the organization and conception of the book, and I should like to thank them here. Donald Fleming of Harvard University provided invaluable advice on matters of style and structure from the very beginning of the enterprise. John Higham of the University of Michigan offered both encouragement and shrewd criticism. Mark Solomon of Simmons College gave me the benefit of his own ideas, his experience, and his friendship. Patricia Wismer read the entire manuscript, and her response, as a non-expert, was sometimes more significant than that of the professional historian. My wife, Betty, displayed superhuman understanding, sympathy, and patience from

beginning to end. Needless to say, their aid has strengthened the book, but for its weaknesses I alone am responsible.

I should also like to express my gratitude to Harvard University, the University of Texas, and the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, whose research grants afforded me the time and resources to complete the manuscript.

Finally, I must acknowledge the man to whom this book is dedicated. Many of his suggestions are incorporated in the work; many of his ideas are reflected in the argument; many of his objections have forced me to revise my own point of view. But more important, Warren Susman has served as a model of what a teacher, a historian, and an intellectual ought to be. I am more grateful for that than anything else.

—RICHARD H. PELLS

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE—PROGRESSIVISM AND THE 1920s

One of the more compelling myths about American history is its susceptibility to categorization by decades. Especially in the twentieth century, when successive crises seem to produce a new generation every ten years, Americans are peculiarly addicted to the notion that monumental changes occur with the taking of the census. Thus we tend to think of the Progressive era as having ended conveniently around 1919; the 1920s as a self-contained entity closes appropriately in 1929 with the stock-market crash; the depression dutifully lasts ten years and is followed by the postwar decades, each of which assumes a singular personality usually drawn from the party in power.

While this way of visualizing the past does correspond to reality in important respects, it nevertheless obscures the continuity of movements, issues, and ideas over a longer period of time. It may be more accurate to consider the social and cultural experience of America as an ongoing series of tensions and conflicts, none of which is ever more than temporarily resolved. In this view, certain events become somewhat less cataclysmic than they originally appear, and a legendary crisis does not usher in a "new era" nearly so much as it passes on the problems of the old.

Yet the sense of living in a totally new situation is not entirely imaginary. For those who have been wounded by some massive social upheaval, the psychological scars remain to shape the way they see and act in the world. The issues they confront may be part of the nation's heritage, but their mental set, the words they use to describe their perceptions, the special

urgency with which they search for solutions, the mood of a society coping with what it thinks is unprecedented, all combine to form a distinctive state of mind which becomes *in fact* something genuinely new. The feeling of hovering uncertainly between past and future, traditional and revolutionary, makes every emergency seem apocalyptic, but at the same time it forces people to deal with reality and with themselves in ways that are often truly creative. In this mixture of old and new, a decade can be seen both as a transmitter of historic controversies and as a unique period of time in its own right.

It has been customary to proclaim October 1929 as the month that symbolized the death not only of the 1920s but of a simpler, more pristine America. With the collapse of the Wall Street boom, a new age presumably was born—one which would alter the institutions and character of the country beyond recognition. Indeed we instinctively respond to the 1930s as the beginning of our own time; it is somehow "modern" and contemporary in contrast to the earlier, more remote decades of the twentieth century. As we watch old films on television or in revivals, as fashion designers return to the depression for stylistic ideas, as politicians debate the legacy of the New Deal, it is easy to conceive of the decade as a social and cultural watershed between "our" world and "theirs." But many of those who lived through the 1930s revealed, however unconsciously, a far greater sense of their relation to and dependence on the past than we now acknowledge. On a variety of levels—political, economic, social, intellectual—the principles and programs of these years had their roots in the Progressive era and the 1920s. It is in the beliefs and experiences which preceded the depression that we find an initial understanding of what the depression itself meant.

1. *The Dynamics of Prewar Reform*

The opening years of the twentieth century were crucial in molding the outlook, expectations, and assumptions of the intellectual community as well as those of ordinary men and women. During the height of Progressivism a number of social and cultural ideas coalesced briefly around the movement for immediate political reform. The seeds of the Progressive spirit had germinated slowly in the years following the Civil War, fertilized by the often disparate values and aspirations of free-lance intellectuals and university professors imbued with the ideal of public service, novelists and journalists suddenly conscious of their "social" obligations, agrarian radicals and urban labor leaders, declassed professionals, socialists of all temperaments and doctrines, men of old wealth disturbed by the brutalities of

industrial capitalism and uneasy about their own status in modern society, an increasingly anxious middle class frightened by monopolization on the one hand and by the potentially revolutionary "lower classes" on the other, and an emerging generation of politicians sensitive to the new moods. Traumatized by the depression of the 1890s and the wave of Populist agitation threatening to engulf the land, searching for "new frontiers" to replace the one Frederick Jackson Turner announced was now closed, these groups merged by the turn of the century into a loose and occasionally incompatible alliance of reformers bent on testing their ideas, hopes, and fears in the laboratory of state and national politics.

From the outset, Progressivism as a model for social change meant different things to different men. For some among the older middle class, the Progressive movement promised a restoration of competitive capitalism, the resurrection of laissez faire, the dismantling of monopolies and trusts, a decentralized economic order, and the revival of personal opportunities somehow diminished by the rise of industry and the city.[1] For others, the heyday of Jeffersonian individualism was already passed, if it had ever really existed. To the new professionals, technicians, and managers—themselves creations and servants of corporate America—Progressivism involved what Robert Wiebe has called a search for "order": an effort to grapple with the inherent anarchy of economic life by introducing further elements of organization and stability to industrial capitalism. Together with some businessmen (and many socialists), they shared the desire for a rationalized economy, the urge for a more efficient system of production and distribution, a growing reliance on executive and administrative decision-making, an acceptance of bureaucracy, and a longing for reforms that might eliminate the danger of widespread social chaos. Though great concentrations of wealth and power still bothered them, they were averse neither to monopoly nor to regulation.[2]

Yet whether they followed the "New Freedom" of Woodrow Wilson or the "New Nationalism" of Theodore Roosevelt, the men of the Progressive generation were seeking some way of coming to terms with and retaining control over the new institutions of twentieth-century America. Living at the dawn of an era extraordinarily complex and increasingly interdependent, forced to adapt to conditions for which neither agrarianism nor nineteenth-century liberalism had adequate explanations, they strove to make sense out of the modern world with ideologies and forms of political action that blended old and new. Ironically, they became radical innovators with profoundly conservative goals.

It was probably the intellectuals who saw more clearly than anyone else

the need for a different set of concepts and attitudes with which to understand and act upon social conditions. For nearly a century they had felt themselves out of touch with American life—isolated from the centers of power, repelled by the dominant ethic of greed and acquisitiveness, yet largely unable to bring the values of the mind into harmony with daily experience. Rarely were they comfortable in the role of critic or artist. When Progressivism appeared, with its emphasis on rational persuasion and social change through education, many writers eagerly enlisted in the army of reformers. Since the Progressives assumed that America might be remodeled through the application of intelligence to social problems, and since they had an abiding faith in the capacity of ideas to awaken public virtue, the movement was in its turn perfectly suited to the skills and ambitions of the intellectual community.

For these reasons, the cultural mood of Progressivism seemed peculiarly utilitarian. The yearning to experience "reality" no matter how sordid, to influence politics no matter how corrupting, to be of "service" no matter what compromises were involved led a number of writers to forgo detached inquiry and speculation—indeed to abandon the very belief that such speculation could ever be truly disinterested. The age of *a priori* truths and timeless values was dead. In its place, men grew more sensitive to the ways in which thought was determined by history, culture, and class. Theory, they discovered, must henceforth be related to the surrounding environment. Thus Pragmatism emerged as an experimental philosophy for human action. The law was seen as an accumulation of judicial decisions rather than as a set of fixed constitutional principles. Historians shifted their preoccupation with the past to a conscious concern for the present. Social scientists studied the personality and behavior of men against the background of existing institutions. Educators rejected formal pedagogy and sought instead the adjustment of the child to contemporary social needs. Journalists and novelists adopted naturalistic techniques to expose the underside of American life in the hope of stimulating reform. Intellectuals began to visualize themselves as advisers to statesmen, and in 1912 one of their own finally captured the Presidency for them all.[3]

Perhaps their creed was most eloquently expressed in Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life,* where the impulse toward a democratic collectivism was elevated to a cultural as well as an economic ideal. Croly published his book in 1909. It rapidly became the bible not only of the Roosevelt wing of Progressivism but also of that group of liberal intellectuals whose voice became the *New Republic* after 1914—among them John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, Walter Weyl, George Soule, and Bruce Bliven.