
The Unpredictable Past

EXPLORATIONS IN
AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY

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American Culture and the Great Depression

In the Fall of 1984, I was a member of an American Studies delegation invited by the Chinese Ministry of Education to visit universities and government institutes in China to determine the state of their study and teaching of the United States and to suggest what American scholars might do to further those endeavors in the Chinese academic world. During that absorbing journey I came to know Kai Erikson, a professor of sociology at Yale University, who talked with me about a two-part series, "Reflections on America," he was publishing in *The Yale Review*, which he edited, and to which he asked me to contribute a piece reflecting on American life during the Great Depression.

Though I was born five days before Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated and have some youthful impressions of the closing years of the Depression, Kai was clearly asking me to contribute scholarly, not personal, reflections. As a *scholar*, my Depression experiences really began only when I came to Berkeley to teach in 1962. In my first year I was asked to teach a large lecture course on the United States from 1929 to the present. Fifteen weeks—forty-five lectures—on America *since* 1929; a period of only thirty-three years duration! I was overwhelmed; nothing in my undergraduate studies at The City College of New York or my graduate studies at Columbia University had prepared me to teach those years in such detail. Indeed, though a few of my teachers, like William Leuchtenburg, occasionally ventured beyond the Great Depression, that was rare. Nor had American historians in general yet written much about those years. Thus in the first few years of my lecture course, my students found me spending what must have seemed to them an inordinate amount of time on the 1930s, with which I felt much more familiar, as a historian, than the rest of the period. Although my early lectures tended to be political and institutional, I quickly became fascinated with and engaged in understanding thirties' culture and began to appreciate

with ways of presenting that culture—especially in its popular and mass manifestations—to my students.

While I had not yet published anything on the Depression when Kai spoke with me, it was my intention—and still is—to someday write a book on American culture and the Great Depression. Thus, utilizing materials from my class lectures, from a lecture on Depression culture I had given in varied formats at several museums and universities, and from a paper I was preparing for the 1985 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, I took this opportunity to articulate in print some of my still tentative overviews concerning Americans and their culture during the Great Depression.

After this essay was published in *The Yale Review*, 74 (Winter 1985), I went on to write a number of other pieces on Depression culture, three of which are included in this volume and follow the present essay. In re-reading the four Depression pieces for this collection, I found that I obviously had liked my ways of putting things so well I occasionally used them more than once in essays which were written over a series of years, published separately, and not originally intended to be read consecutively. Borrowing from oneself is not one of the cardinal sins; Mozart and many of his colleagues did it repeatedly. But in my case, I fear, the repetitions don't bring quite the same pleasures. Thus I have left this first essay as it was originally written and have tried to remove as many redundancies as practical from the three essays that follow it.



Say, my mind's going back to 19 and 29.

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Say, I lose my job, and I didn't have one more dime.

When he recorded these words in 1974, the bluesman K. C. Douglas was in good company. America's mind has seldom strayed too far from that year of trauma and the decade of depression that followed it. Every economic setback since the Second World War has brought inevitable comparisons with, and pervasive fears of, a return to the conditions that prevailed during the Great Depression. The thirties have become one of the most essential criteria by which we measure our well-being and security. But their significance transcends this. That almost half a century after the Depression ended Americans still sing about it, write and read about it, make and watch movies depicting it, pay fascinated attention to the iconographic gallery created by contemporary photographers, attend to the testimony of its survivors, revive its music, its drama, and its fashions, attests to the profound impact the Depression has had upon our culture and our imaginations.

It is ironic, then, that we still know so little about the culture of a

decade that has made such a lasting imprint upon us, and that so much of what we do know is so overwhelmingly political and institutional. Until relatively recently, we have spoken and written as if the political culture of the 1930s represented all of American culture; as if Franklin Roosevelt and his advisers spoke for the vast majority of Americans; as if one could understand the impact of the Depression upon American consciousness by comprehending the reform impulse of the 1930s. Until we begin to explore more fully than we have the varied cultural dimensions of the Depression decade, we will continue to have more questions than answers.

One of the most important and interesting questions that continues to disturb us plagued contemporaries as well. "I do not know why there isn't more revolutionary spirit developing," the social worker Lillian Wald mused in 1931. Nor do we know all these years later. "The amazing thing," Sherwood Anderson observed, "is that there is so little bitterness," and we continue to share his amazement. "Our vegetable garden is coming along well and we are less worried about revolution than we used to be," the *New Yorker* commented in 1932 when conditions were close to their nadir. "People are in a sad but not a rebellious mood."

There were some, like Chicago's mayor Anton Cermak, who seriously predicted revolution if conditions did not improve rapidly. And there were others who echoed the impatience of New York's Fiorello LaGuardia: "We are either going to have child labor laws, old age pensions, and unemployment insurance in this country, or we are going to have chaos and disorder, and something worse. There is something peculiar about human beings. They just simply refuse to go hungry. And you can't preach loyalty on an empty stomach."

There is abundant evidence that Cermak and LaGuardia were correct: had there been no eventual social and economic reform of significance, there would have been upheaval of some kind. "I am going to feed my children," a Kentucky miner told an investigating committee. "I am going to kill, murder, rob for my children because I won't let my children starve. . . . If you put a man into poverty then you send him down to Hell and sin. Believe me, it would not take much for me to go down and steal a good square meal." Early in the New Deal, a Michigan villager told a federal official:

I don't believe you realize how bad things were getting before this set-up started. . . . They all said that if things got any worse and something didn't happen pretty soon, they'd go down Main Street and crash the windows and take what they needed. They wouldn't pick on the little stores. They'd go after the big stores first. . . . No man is going to let his wife

Even as the New Deal reform began to expand in 1935, the bluesman Carl Martin sang:

Everybody's crying: "Let's have a New Deal,"
'Cause I've got to make a living,
If I have to rob and steal.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to convert such testimony into descriptions of the national mood. No matter how completely one may agree with those who predicted upheaval if reform did not come, the remarkable thing about the American people before reform did come was not their action but their inaction, not their demands but their passivity, not their revolutionary spirit but their traditionalism.

Probably no people is ever really prepared for major economic crisis. But it would be difficult to find a nation as unprepared as the United States was in 1929. To be sure, there were significant groups—regional, occupational, ethnic—that had not shared in the abundance of twentieth-century industrial America. For many black Americans the Depression merely intensified an unjust economic situation that had long been prevalent. "De raggedy man see de hahd time, . . . When his money is gone," black workers in the South sang during the 1930s. "Now you an' me see de hahd time, . . . Sence we wuz bawn." Nevertheless, as a people, Americans had not experienced a major protracted economic crisis since the 1890s.

The shock caused by the Depression stemmed not alone from lack of experience. It came also—and perhaps largely—from ideology and expectations. The American people, of course, did not enter the Depression as a tabula rasa; they entered it with ideals, values, and hopes—and one must understand how these interacted with the events of the 1930s. Belief in secular progress had been traditional with Americans at least since the era of the Enlightenment and continued to exert great influence throughout the early decades of the twentieth century—especially in its material form. It is because the prophecy of inevitable progress had become so intricately equated with material growth and material expansion that the Depression had a particularly profound emotional and psychological impact. In one prolonged blow a large part of the expectations of the American people seemed to have been stripped away.

Americans had been living in what they had assured themselves was a supremely rational and progressive society. Suddenly they found themselves inhabiting a land whose cruel incongruities and ironies could no longer be ignored. Everywhere there was want and yet everywhere there was plenty. People were hungry and crops rotted in the field. Children went without clothes while clothing factories closed down and cotton crops were being destroyed to keep them off the market. Americans were bewildered by the

rapidity of events and what appeared to be the completeness of the destruction of their plans, their expectations, their certainties. Not only were they suddenly transformed from recipients of the ever-increasing fruits of a golden land into victims of malevolent forces, but these forces appeared to be almost anonymous and unidentifiable. It was, in those early years, hard to know either where to turn or whom to blame. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck captured the pervasive bewilderment, the sense of impotent anger, that characterized so much of Depression America. Squatting in the doorways of their cabins, his Oklahoma tenant farmers watch tractors sent by the bank push down the fences and houses which had demarcated the land they and their fathers before them had farmed. An outraged tenant approaches the tractor driver and engages him in the following dialogue:

"[This house] is mine. I built it. You bump it down—I'll be in the window with a rifle. You even come too close and I'll pot you like a rabbit."

"It's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it. And look—suppose you kill me? They'll just hang you, but long before you're hung there'll be another guy on the tractor, and he'll bump the house down. You're not killing the right guy."

"That's so," the tenant said. "Who gave you orders? I'll go after him. He's the one to kill."

"You're wrong. He got his orders from the bank. The bank told him, 'Clear those people out or it's your job.'"

"Well, there's a president of the bank. There's a board of directors. I'll fill up the magazine of the rifle and go into the bank."

The driver said, "Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, 'Make the land show profit or we'll close you up.'"

"But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's starving me."

"I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all . . ."

The more than one million men and women drifting through the country on foot and in freight cars were an appropriate symbol of the mood of the people at large. Even their protests often had no readily identifiable ends. There was a good deal of anger without meaningful focus, a good deal of movement without direction.

Very much related to the factor of trauma in explaining the mood of the American people in the early years of the Depression was that of fear. In answering her own question as to why there was so little revolutionary spirit in the country, Lillian Wald wrote: "People are so glad to be kept above the starving line that the fear of losing that may be at the bottom." A number of scholars have argued that the borderline of economic and social ca-

tastrophe does not constitute the optimal environment for radical activity. "The abjectly poor, and all those persons whose energies are entirely absorbed by the struggle for daily sustenance, are conservative because they cannot afford the effort of taking thought for the day after to-morrow," Thorstein Veblen wrote in the wake of the Depression of 1893. And Eric Hoffer has maintained: "The intensified struggle for existence is a static rather than a dynamic influence." This proposition—that the struggle for sustenance and the search for personal security so dominated the lives of many Americans that they had little time to worry about larger issues—needs further testing and exploration. It is certainly true that such early Depression expressions of agrarian dissent as the Cow War and the Farm Holiday Movement were strongest in western Iowa, eastern Nebraska, and southern Minnesota, where land values were high and income well above average, and much less prevalent in areas with low land values and high rates of tenancy. It is equally true that when too many people were scrambling for too few jobs it was difficult to build a sense of group solidarity—a sense which American workers have rarely had in any case.

We do not yet understand enough about the unemployed in the United States. Contemporary studies of unemployment in Europe found that the hate and envy of the unemployed often focused upon an unexpected object: not the employer but the employed. The world, according to an unemployed man in Poland, was divided into only two groups: those with jobs and those without. Fear and insecurity helped to dissolve or weaken many of the bonds that had existed among workers. "The unemployed," two students of the situation in Austria and Poland in the early 1930s concluded, "are a mass only numerically, not socially."

This proposition, too, needs testing for the United States. But we also need to understand what it meant for those who were employed to know that if they lost the job they had they were unlikely to find other work. In 1939, Anna Novak spoke of her experiences in the Chicago meat-packing houses when she had begun to work there eight years earlier:

We used to have to buy the foremen presents, you know. On all the holidays, Christmas, Easter, Holy Week, Good Friday, you'd see the men coming to work with hip pockets bulging and take the foremen off in corners, handing over their half pints. They sure would lay for you if you forgot their whiskey, too. Your job wasn't worth much if you didn't observe the holiday "customs." The women had to bring 'em bottles, just the same as the men. You could get along swell if you let the boss slap you on the behind and feel you up. God, I hate that stuff, you don't know! I'd rather work *any* place but in the stockyards just for that reason alone. I tried to get out a couple of times. Went to work for Container Corn. I Box

factory near the yards.] Used to swing a hammer on those big wooden boxes. Look at my hands, now. [Her hands are misshapen; blunted, thickened fingers and calloused at every joint.] My husband wouldn't let me keep on there, it got to be too much for me to handle. I had to have work so I went back to the yards.

It was not unusual testimony. "In '34 they had me going like a clock 10 and 12 hours a day. I used to get home so tired I'd just sit down at the table and cry like a baby," Mary Siporin remembered in the closing years of the decade. "I mean there's a conditioning here by the Depression," a garbage worker told interviewers, many years later. "I'm what I call a security cat. I don't dare switch [jobs]. 'Cause I got too much whiskers on it, seniority."

The testimony of both the employed and unemployed in the early phases of the Depression helps us to comprehend just how important the element of fear and the desire for security were to the Depression generation. When the sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd revisited "Middletown"—Muncie, Indiana—in 1935, they found a community "scarred by fear." In the decades following the Second World War, the tendency to look back nostalgically upon the thirties as a time of commitment, crusading, and reform has led us to lose sight of so mundane a concern as security. To be sure, the quest for security could be channeled into the area of reform, as it was under the New Deal, whose most enduring and popular reforms dealt with such matters as unemployment insurance and old-age pensions. One might argue as well that the hunger for security was even more important than a sense of class solidarity in leading millions of workers to support the CIO in the late 1930s. But in the bleak early years of the Depression, when America's economic situation and prospects were at their worst, this quest for security, this concern with one's own fortunes and needs, can help to explain the initial inaction of the American people.

Just how personal the search for security was in the early thirties can be seen in American advertising. Under a drawing of a couple lost in a dark forest of imposing trees, a pharmaceutical company declared: "The past few years have been years of worry. Fears have walked abroad. Nerves have been harassed as never before." Though the trend had begun earlier, and was certainly prominent during the 1920s, the emphasis on the fear of personal failure and the desire for a sense of personal security intensified and became one of the dominant motifs in Depression-decade advertising. Magazine ads in the early 1930s were filled with pictures of anxious men and women plagued by lack of sleep, lack of confidence, lack of financial means, lack of foresight and planning; beset by the scourge of halitosis, flawed skin, yellow teeth, bad English, caffeine addiction; worried by every fear imag-

all its ease and sophistication, is still afflicted by the monsters of disaster. Always they are ready and waiting to wipe out the savings of years or to impose upon you unexpected and disastrous financial obligations." "ARE YOU GUARDING YOUR CHILD?" Phillips' Milk of Magnesia wanted to know. "IS A MOTHER'S LOVE ENOUGH?" Johnson & Johnson wondered, while warning that "even some bandages that are plainly marked 'sterilized' on the package are not worthy of your trust . . . dirty fingers may have touched them . . . destroyed their cleanliness." A host of advertisers emphasized that "in times like these," "when jobs are hard to get—hard to hold," when "the man who is sick—or half-sick—is soon outstripped by competition," nobody could afford to "miss a single day" due to colds, constipation, sore muscles, or aching backs.

In the insecure, disaster-prone world of American advertising, relief was just around the corner. "Irritable. Nervous. Jumpy. He knows it himself, but doesn't know why. What a pity someone doesn't tell him—*before he cracks!*" Happily, General Foods was there to point its finger at the coffee habit and its cure: drinking Postum. Jobs could be kept, lovers won, social acceptance assured by bathing with Lifebuoy Soap, shaving with Gillette Razor Blades, drinking Ovaltine, using Listerine Mouth Wash. And always, the security that seemed so elusive could be assured. Bankers Life warned against the man who was "Kind to His WIFE but Cruel to His WIDOW," and stressed how unnecessary such behavior was since "Security is such a precious thing to a woman . . . such an easy thing for a man to give." "Securely yours," an automobile ad boasted, "here is a picture of security—the security to seek for your family, the security that is theirs on the highway too, in a body by Fisher."

If security was in fact more difficult to obtain in the real world, the world of the ads was not one of unremitting fantasy; it mirrored—and intensified—one of the decade's most persistent and profound concerns. Indeed, the overt assurance that security was within reach if only individuals took the proper initiative was often belied by the dominant visual images of the ads. The somber tones, the dark shadows, the anxious faces, the haunted looks that pervaded so much of American advertising were a testament to the anxieties, fears, and despair that haunted so many Americans as the Great Crash of 1929 settled into the Great Depression of the 1930s.

If we left our explanation of the mood of the American people during the initial stages of the Great Depression at this—the result of shock and fear—we would have explained a good deal. But we would be overlooking the most interesting and possibly the most important element: the tendency to internalize the responsibility for one's position which often led to feelings of shame.

Americans had long been taught that human beings were ultimately responsible for themselves; that they were the architects of their own fortunes, the masters of their own fate; that material success was a sign of virtue, and failure a sign of personal worthlessness; that poverty was not merely unfortunate, but somehow disreputable, even sinful; that unemployment was an indication of indolence and failure. Despite all of the objective evidence that the American people were victims of external circumstances largely beyond their control, substantial numbers of them had so internalized the traditional sense of personal responsibility for such conditions as unemployment and poverty, that while on the one hand they might reject Herbert Hoover for not giving them adequate help, on the other they felt a deep sense of shame for being in such a dependent position.

Though the *New Yorker* was hardly a representative journal, it was speaking for more than its usual constituency when it asserted in 1932: "It has always seemed to us difficult to be a rebel in this country where there is nothing to rebel against except one's own stupidity." Following an automobile tour of the country, Sherwood Anderson was almost incredulous at the attitudes of the people he met. Hitchhiker after hitchhiker he picked up on the road apologized to him, a total stranger, for being down and out. "It is a very queer thing but the truth is that we Americans, who talk so proudly of our individuality and of our independence, are always going about explaining ourselves." The reason for this, he concluded, is that "We Americans have all been taught, from childhood, that it is a sort of moral obligation for each of us to rise, to get up in the world. . . . Progress. Progress. That was the cry." He invited his readers to test his theory for themselves:

. . . the next time you are on the road pick up one of the Americans now down and out. Talk to him in a friendly way. See how quickly he begins to explain himself, to apologize. It may be that he has nothing to do with the circumstances that have put him where he is but just the same he feels guilty. He does not blame his civilization. He feels that in some way he is not a good American because he has not risen above his fellows.

There is the wheat farmer who for a few years was a prosperous farmer. Now he is down and out. He is old and knows he cannot get work. He was going to live with some of his dead wife's relatives and was ashamed. He needed little encouragement from me to begin explaining himself. Although he had worked hard all his life, raising food for people to eat, he was in no way indignant about what his civilization had done to him. He should have been smarter, shrewder, should have taken more advantage of other men. "It's my own fault," he said, "I was not smart enough."

As if to document Anderson's observations, A. S. Johnson, a migrant farmer from Arkansas living in a Farm Security Administration Camp in Yuba City,

California, in 1940, reflected on his own experiences: "Our sorrows and trials and tribulations are brought on by ourselves, more than anybody. Mine has. I'm a judging everybody from myself." When one of his interviewers asked him why he thought his troubles were his own fault, he responded: "It's because I didn't do like I should've done. I didn't look ahead strong enough to see. I'll tell you my great trouble, boys, and you'll find it that-a-way along through life. You take some people and they'll never know what a dollar's worth. . . . I've made good money. Just about as good a money as most men that work for wages. But it's, I guess, come easy and go easy. I didn't save it." This internalization of responsibility was common. The following letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from a woman in Aurelia, Iowa, was typical of a substantial number of the millions of letters written to the Roosevelts during the Depression:

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I am coming to you for help please do not think this does not cause a great feeling of shame to me to have to ask for old clothing. I am a Luthern Sunday school teacher. We are very poor. I know we must not let our clothes keep us from church (neither do I), but some times I feel so badly when I see all the others dressed so nice. I don't care for swell clothes, But you know one feels awful in old clothes worn shiney and thread bare. I think your clothes would fit me by your picture. Please do not think me unworthy. I am so badly in need of a summer coat and under things and dresses. oh don't think that it is not with a effort I ask you to please send me anything you may have on hand in that line which you do not care to wear yourself. Not a great lot only a few please. I never thot the time would come when I would find it nessary to do this oh please help me. May god bless you and Mr. Rosevelt. If you think me unworthy don't send anything. But think! think! hard put yourself in my place. we mothers always put what little we have to spend on our children. I to am a mother. I haven't had a new coat in 16 years so please don't think me unworthy I do not wish my children to feel ashamed. regardless of what you do please do not put my name and letter up for people to laugh at.

The sentiment in the final line was repeated in letter after letter: "My one request is, to please keep this correspondence confidential." "I would not wish at the cost of my life that any one should know I wrote you this letter." "I am sorry I cannot give you my name as I do not want publicity." "It is So EmbarreSing to Sign my full name I will Just give my initials."

The shame in so much of this testimony was often accompanied by a strong sense of dignity. Mr. Johnson of Yuba City made it clear that his material failures had not made him lose a sense of his own worth. "I've raised two mighty fine boys and a mighty fine girl. I don't fesser my life's

wasted. Here's how it is. A man that wastes his life is a man that goes through with everything in the world he has ever made or ever had and leaves no representatives behind. That's the way I've got it figured. Well I've got three parties—we have—to represent us . . . and I've not lived for nothing. No! I haven't lived for nothing." But if the pervasive sense of internalized responsibility did not necessarily eliminate feelings of self-esteem, it did seem to mitigate expressions of overt anger or indignation.

The common feelings of shame were exacerbated by the tensions that joblessness and poverty created within families. "One of the most common things—and it certainly happened to me—was this feeling of your father's failure," the son of an unemployed carpenter testified. "Sure things were tough, but why should I be the kid who had to put a piece of cardboard into the sole of my shoe to go to school? . . . It was simply this feeling of regret that somehow he hadn't done better. . . . There was conflict in the home. . . . Children develop doubts about their parents. They leave home early, out of necessity." Dr. Nathan Ackerman, a psychiatrist who did field work in 1937 among Pennsylvania miners who had been unemployed from two to five years, was impressed by the "internal distress" the men felt:

They hung around street corners and in groups. They gave each other solace. They were loath to go home because they were indicted, as if it were their fault for being unemployed. A jobless man was a lazy good-for-nothing. The women punished the men for not bringing home the bacon, by withholding themselves sexually. By belittling and emasculating the men, undermining their paternal authority, turning to the eldest son. Making the eldest son the man of the family. These men suffered from depression. They felt despised, they were ashamed of themselves.

The propensity many Americans had to internalize the blame for what had happened to them during the early years of the Depression was intensified by the statements and writings of many of their leaders and guides. If during periods of prosperity people did not practice the habits of thrift and prudence, if they gambled away their savings, John E. Edgerton, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, asked in 1930, "Is our economic system or government or industry to blame? What system or government can keep people from being fools?" In March 1931, at a time when he was only employing 32 percent of his workers full time, Henry Ford declared, "The average man won't really do a day's work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty to do, if people would do it." Roger Babson's 1932 book, *Cheer Up!*, was typical of many manuals of the time in attributing the Depression to "the dishonesty, inefficiency, and general carelessness which develop during good times." The good news was that if the financial crisis was due to individual failings, it could be cured by

"moral character," by the application of "courage, confidence, and conquest." His approach was typified by his word to the wives:

Do not forget that your acquiescences and folly helped to push your husband over the edge, and that the present hard times furnishes you with an opportunity to redeem yourself by helping him to keep up the courage and energy to rebuild. . . . Now is the hour to rectify your mistake and his by an enthusiastic, energetic activity, a stout heart and a word of good cheer.

Throughout the country newspapers argued that economic crises were merely a question of attitude and if only people would stop hoarding their money, good times would return. "The whole depression business is largely mental," a Muncie, Indiana, newspaper editorialized in June 1930. "If tomorrow morning everybody should wake up with a resolve to unwind the red yarn that is wound about his old leather purse, and then would carry his resolve into effect, by August first, at the latest, the whole country could join in singing, 'Happy Days Are Here Again.'" "

Attitudes like these, which were no strangers to the Hoover administration, help explain the constant attempt to restore "confidence" as if it were the individual rather than the system that had broken down. "Ninety percent of our difficulty in depressions," President Hoover asserted, "is caused by fear." Even Franklin Roosevelt kept this line of reasoning alive in the famous aphorism from his first inaugural address, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Once again, American advertising reflected one of the dominant moods of these early Depression years. "In the final analysis, we are responsible for our own defeats and our own victories," a 1932 ad from International Correspondence Schools advised. "It's Time for Action!" the businessman in an Addressograph-Multigraph ad vowed. "I'm one of thousands of business men who have been sitting tight, waiting for business to return to normal. . . . Now I'm tired of waiting for a miracle to happen. I'm going to do something about it—*myself*. I've determined that my salvation lies in my own hands." A Ford Motor Company ad asserted in 1932, "Being unemployed does not need to mean being out of work. There may be work even though one may not be hired to do it. In the last analysis independence means self-dependence." The Hammermill Paper Company warned in 1932, "For many, the present salary cuts will be permanent," but not "for the man who *refuses* to stay down." In June 1932, Hamilton Watches advised those graduating to "be thankful they are graduating in a TOUGH YEAR!" and pitied the graduates of the past "who had missed the moulding lessons" of early struggle "by graduating into a too soft and ready world!"

Although many of these attitudes softened and altered as the crisis per-

sisted, popular culture throughout the Depression decade remained a central vehicle for the dissemination and perpetuation of those traditional values that emphasized personal responsibility for one's position in the world. A case in point was Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Published in June 1936, the novel sold a million copies by the end of the year. It dominated all fiction sales for two years and became the basis of the decade's most spectacular movie. We often employ such imprecise and unhelpful terms as "escapism" to explain phenomena like *Gone with the Wind*. Even if the American people were seeking to "escape" their plight, however, the real question is why they chose this particular vehicle to do it; why, in the midst of the nation's worst economic crisis, so many Americans should have been so deeply attracted to a novel about the Civil War. There is no single explanation, but we would be committing a serious error if we did not attempt to understand the extent to which Americans were attracted to those cultural expressions which helped them, or at least appeared to help them, comprehend their own world. The real significance of *Gone with the Wind*, then, was not escape—it probably provided no more of that than most expressive culture does—but reaffirmation. Looking beneath the surface of the novel, it is clear that it depicted a world not really far removed from the America of the 1930s: a world which at the beginning of the novel was bursting with hope and promise, as the America of the 1920s with its promise of unprecedented and unending prosperity had been; a world governed by order and reason, as the world of the 1920s had seemed to be to so many Americans; a world which suddenly disintegrated into the chaos and unreason of civil war, as the world of the 1920s had suddenly disintegrated into the chaos and unreason of economic crisis. Through the novel's more than a thousand pages, Scarlett O'Hara emerges as the individual who refuses to give in to these irrational processes. She survives the war, the siege of Atlanta, the destruction of her society. She grows and matures, rebuilds her plantation, and, although on the very last page she loses her man, Rhett Butler, she remains unbowed:

With the spirit of her people who would not know defeat, even when it stared them in the face, she raised her chin. She could get Rhett back. She knew she could. There had never been a man she couldn't get, once she set her mind upon him.

"I'll think of it tomorrow . . . I can stand it then. Tomorrow, I'll think of some way to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day."

In the culture of the 1930s, the calamities of the past could become didactic mechanisms for illustrating the ways in which people might triumph over adversity, rediscovering in the process those enduring values they had lost sight of in better times. The most profitable film of 1936, *San Francisco*

which reenacted the 1906 earthquake, provides another example. Mary Black (Jeanette MacDonald), a minister's daughter, migrates from her small town to pursue her singing career. In San Francisco she meets Blackie Moran (Clark Gable), a gambler and proprietor of a Barbary Coast saloon, who does everything he can to convert her to his life style, attempting to divert her career from the opera to the world of popular entertainment, even insisting that she appear publicly in a skimpy costume. Having alienated her through his insensitivity and obstinacy, Moran discovers the extent of his true feelings only during the earthquake. Searching for her everywhere amid the ruins of San Francisco, the transformed saloon keeper has even attained enough humility to sink to his knees in prayer when he finally finds her. His priorities sorted out, Moran is reunited with his love and together they join a crowd of refugees singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," as they descend from the surrounding hills to rebuild the stricken city, over which the image of modern San Francisco is superimposed. The analogies are clear: the individual could rise above disaster—be it civil war, earthquake, or depression—in pursuit of redemption, a theme that penetrated much of Depression culture.

Radio proved to be as important a vehicle for this message as the movies. The humorist Will Rogers, whose casual wit and rustic manner made him something of a folk hero, frequently used his extremely popular weekly radio show to discuss the economic crisis. In the fall of 1931, he warned his listeners that they had better stop wasting energy on peripheral issues. "What does Prohibition amount to your neighbor's children, if they're not eating? Food, not drink, is our problem today." The *only* issue, he insisted, was a more equal division of the nation's wealth. "All the feed is going into one manger and the stock on the other side of the stall ain't getting a thing. . . . We got it, but we don't know how to split it up." "The working classes didn't bring this on," he advised his audience. "It was the big boys."

Yet even in the midst of his iconoclasm, Rogers's major thrust was to reiterate traditional ideals in a manner that led him in the final analysis to attribute the nation's plight to the failure of the individual. He warned the nation that the "cuckoo times" of the late 1920s would never return, and a good thing too since it was during those "lunatic" years that Americans had forsaken the work ethic and learned the profligate ways that brought them to their present plight. "The trouble with America is it's just muscle-bound from holding the steering wheel. The only place we're callused from work is the bottom of our driving toe." It was in this context that Rogers enunciated his famous aphorism: "We are the first nation in the history of the world to go to the poorhouse in an automobile." We had been so preoccupied with frivolities and games, with "getting radios and bathtubs and facial

creams, and straight eights, that we forgot to see if we had any bacon or beans." There was only one way to relieve unemployment:

and that's for everybody to go to work. *Where?* Why right where you are. Look around, you will see a lot of things to do: weeds to cut, fences to be fixed, lawns to be mowed, filling stations to be robbed, gangsters to be catered to. There is a million little odds and ends right under your eye that an idle man can turn his hand to every day. 'Course he won't get paid for it, but he won't get paid for not doing it. My theory is that it will keep him in practice in case something does show. You can keep practicing so that work won't be a novelty when it does come.

Attitudes like these were reiterated every evening from 7 to 7:15 P.M., when some forty million Americans tuned in to the adventures of *Amos 'n' Andy*, the early Depression's most popular radio show—so popular that movie theaters interrupted their films to broadcast it. Combining the techniques of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy with the values of that century's success and work ethics, the show's white creators portrayed the adventures of two black migrants from rural Georgia in Chicago and then in New York. The industrious, idealistic, sensible Amos would save his friend Andy from his own indolence, credulity, and pomposity again and again, articulating those lessons that Andy should, but rarely did, learn from the experience. "My papa used to tell me dat yo' ain't never goin' git nuthin' dat yo' don't work fo'. Dis heah thing o' bein' on Easy Street might be alright—I don't know—but I always remember whut he say: if I ever git anything, I goin' have to work fo' it." Tempted by Andy and Kingfish to invest the \$500 he has saved for his marriage in a scheme that would double it, Amos first writes his fiancée for advice. Her answer, the Kingfish ruefully reports, is "dat he made his money de hard way, an' dat was de best way to make sure he was goin' make some more." Amos retained not only his values but his optimism. "Times like dese does a lot o' good," he assured his friends, "'cause when dis is over, which is bound to be, an' good times come back again, people like us dat is livin' today is goin' learn a lesson an' dey goin' know whut a rainy day means . . . so maybe after all, dis was a good thing to bring people back to deyre senses an' sort a remind ev'body dat de sky AIN'T de limit."

Amos's philosophy of hard work and faith was echoed in a myriad of ways in the culture of the period. In 1933 Walt Disney won the first of his Academy Awards for *The Three Little Pigs*, an immensely popular cartoon which emphasized, in song and story, that only those who worked diligently could keep the wolf from their door. While his brothers cavorted about and consequently built insubstantial houses, which the wolf easily blew down,

I build my house of stones.
I build my house of bricks.
I have no chance to sing and dance,
For work and play don't mix.

The Three Little Pigs, according to the *New York Times*, was shown at more theaters during the year than any other film. The critic Lewis Jacobs reported that the film's theme song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" became "a national anthem overnight." In 1934, Disney won another Academy Award for *The Tortoise and the Hare*, which, along with his widely popular *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, continued to reaffirm such traditional values as self-reliance and perseverance.

In 1937 the nation's press turned the death of John D. Rockefeller into a ceremonial occasion for the reiteration of these very values. They reprinted dozens of such Rockefeller aphorisms as "Work! Persevere! Be Honest! Save!" "Live within your means." "You won't have a happy life if you don't work." Rockefeller's life, the *Charlotte Observer* declared, was an example of what "the simple virtues of thrift and frugality and saving will accomplish" and a symbol of the "unlimited possibilities" offered every American citizen. "A tragedy for America if this system and this spirit and this encouragement offered by democracy should perish from the face of the earth!"

The historian's natural propensity to periodize—to divide the years under consideration into neat, distinct, meaningful segments—has to be held in check when dealing with a period as short as a decade. It may be true that the values I have been dealing with were stronger at the beginning than at the end of the thirties, and that the decade of deflated economic activity and hopes inevitably took its toll and produced, or at least expedited, changed attitudes and expectations. The fact remains that throughout the decade of the Depression, one can find traditional attitudes towards the individual, society, work, and mobility expressed with great conviction in a wide variety of cultural genres by virtually all segments of the population. It is equally true, however, that the expressive culture of the decade constitutes a vital indicator of the subtle but important ways in which these values were undergoing alteration.

We must resist the temptation, therefore, to argue that the decade of the 1930s was *either* one thing *or* another, or to divide it into two periods: the first a time of conservatism, the second a time of innovation and change. The mistaken urge of a number of scholars to impose symmetry and order on Roosevelt's dynamic but confused, often contradictory, and always eclectic reform efforts by dividing them into a First and Second New Deal

should not be extended to the realm of expressive culture. Rather, we must try to comprehend the Great Depression as a complex, ambivalent, disorderly period which gave witness to the force of cultural continuity even as it manifested signs of deep cultural change. It is to this latter development that I would now like to turn.

Americans, of course, have been both producers and consumers. Traditionally, however, they were more comfortable conceiving of themselves as producers and organizing around their production functions in such groups as the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Federation of Labor, or the American Medical Association. It is not surprising that the development of a mass consumption economy, which W. W. Rostow has argued was in place by the 1920s, brought inevitable changes in cultural attitudes. Thus by our own time, Americans are more prone to identify themselves as consumers and much easier to organize on this basis than at any other point in their history. While this fundamental shift (which has important implications for our understanding of what happened to traditional American attitudes toward success and the individual) took place not suddenly but cumulatively, as all such changes do, the Great Depression unquestionably expedited it.

In the politics of the 1930s the consumer was called, with reason, the "forgotten man." But in the expressive culture of the decade, we can find crucial indications of the alterations taking place. The sociologist Leo Lowenthal was one of the first observers to begin to delineate the contours of this change. As early as 1944, he called attention to what he termed a shift from producer to consumer consciousness. Comparing the biographies in popular magazines of the early twentieth century with those appearing at the end of the Great Depression, Lowenthal found that the businessmen and politicians who dominated the popular biographies of the early period had given way by 1940 to subjects from the area of popular entertainment. The earlier figures, whom Lowenthal called the "Idols of Production," belonged to vocations that tended to serve society's basic needs, while those of the later period, the "Idols of Consumption," were directly or indirectly related to the sphere of leisure time. The purpose of the earlier biographies was didactic; they held forth examples of success that presumably could be imitated and they concentrated on the process by which their subjects had attained success. This no longer was the purpose of the later biographies whose subjects' rise seemed to be more attributable to being in the right place at the right time, or knowing the right people, or having the right looks or athletic prowess, than to any rational social pattern of upward mobility which could be emulated by eager readers. The emphasis of these later biographies was no longer how their subjects rose to success but what they did with it, how they "spent" it once they had earned it, what effects it had upon their

Again, it is crucial to remember that we are not dealing with an either/or phenomenon. As this essay has tried to demonstrate, there was much greater retention of traditional production values than the specific sources Lowenthal examined indicated. Still, Lowenthal's pioneering research and hypotheses are important in enhancing our understanding of the effects of the Depression upon popular consciousness. Evidences of the transition Lowenthal wrote of existed throughout the culture. Though the popular success literature of the period continued to urge readers to improve themselves, it paid unprecedented attention to questions of consumption and the use of leisure, placed more emphasis upon the present than the future, and no longer focused as strongly upon the deferral of gratification, which had been so essential to the traditional success ethic.

In *Life Begins at Forty*, which was either first or second on the best-seller lists in 1933 and 1934, Walter Pitkin asserted that "AMERICANS DIE YOUNG LARGELY BECAUSE THEY NEVER START LIVING" and denounced "our silly dollar-chasing and our greasy grind of factory and our stupid philosophies of life" which led to exhaustion. Considering that people spent "most of their time and energy in making a living," should we be surprised "that so few of us know how to live?" It was time, he urged his fellow citizens, to carry out "successfully the dominant desires of the moment." Marjorie Hillis, in her best-selling *Orchids on Your Budget* (1937), urged her readers to "get more fun out of living" because "we might die tomorrow." Money, she argued, "should be invested in happiness" since "that drab and old-fashioned virtue," savings, "has never been really enjoyed by anyone except the very penurious and Mr. Coolidge." Coolidge and the virtues he "both preached and embodied—industry, thrift, personal integrity," Paul Hutchinson asserted in *Reader's Digest* in 1933, "are under such scrutiny as they have never been subjected to in the past. They must change—they *are* changing—because Western civilization itself is changing." A good plan, Harold Reilly asserted in the same magazine four years later, "is to forget yesterday, ignore tomorrow, live today." A similar spirit was reflected in such other best-selling manuals of the decade as Edmund Jacobson's *You Must Relax*, Dorothea Brande's *Wake Up and Live!*, and Lin Yutang's *The Importance of Living*.

The ads of the thirties often reflected the trend towards consumption mobility which was to become so important in the decades after the Second World War. Thus in a 1937 ad for Packard, a young boy is pictured leaning against a white picket fence, looking at something wistfully:

Years ago, a little freckle-faced boy watched with envy as a magnificent new motor car went by. To that boy it was more than a motor car, it was a symbol of a new way of life; it was an emblem of . . .

would own a Packard. Yes, I was that boy. And today I'm keeping the promise I made to myself some 25 years ago.

Consumption values had by no means become dominant in the 1930s. The decade's most popular success manual, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—which sold 729,000 copies in 1937 and over ten million in the next twenty-five years—was as preoccupied as ever with traditional concerns over occupational mobility, but in a way which further indicated the changes Americans were experiencing. Carnegie told the story of interviewing Roosevelt's Postmaster General, James Farley, and asking him the secret of his success. "He said, 'Hard work,' and I said, 'Don't be funny.'" Success, Carnegie insisted, was not the result of hard work or technical knowledge; it was due to "skill in human engineering—to personality and the ability to lead people." To teach his multitude of readers the requisite skills, Carnegie offered six rules for making people like you, twelve rules for winning people to your way of thinking, nine rules for changing people without giving offense or arousing resentment, seven rules for making your home life happier. For making other people like you, Carnegie suggested the following strategies: "Smile." "Remember that a man's name is to him the sweetest and most important sound in any language." "Be a good listener." "Make the other person feel important." For winning people to your way of thinking, he advised: "The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it." "Never tell a man he is wrong." "Let the other man do a great deal of the talking." "Let the other man feel that the idea is his."

Dale Carnegie's aims did not differ significantly from those of the nineteenth-century industrialist Andrew Carnegie, but his means would have thoroughly alienated that apostle of success and individualism. The latter-day Carnegie's formulas were those of manipulation, of adjustment, of interpersonal relations. They were formulas more appropriate to the rise of the organizational man than to the rise of the traditional rugged individualist. His great success was a testament to the fact that the old success formulas no longer appealed to a population which had finally become conscious of the implications of the institutionalized, bureaucratized world in which it functioned.

It is hardly surprising that American attitudes towards the success ethos and towards institutions were reflected in the gangster film—which enjoyed its greatest popularity in the early Depression years—since crime had become an avenue of mobility, especially for marginal Americans. According to the historian Mark Haller, of the 108 directors of the Chicago underworld of Italian descent, 29 percent were of Irish de-

some criminals saw their rise in terms of traditional success formulas is made clear by Alvin Karpis, a "public enemy" from Topeka, Kansas, who denied J. Edgar Hoover's charge that he was a "hoodlum." You could succeed in his line of work, Karpis insisted, only "if you were a dedicated stickup man, if you worked hard, if you were determined to keep going in the face of all obstacles, and if you were smart in the choice of your partners and associates."

Like Karpis, the film gangsters portrayed by such actors as Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney were caricatures of the traditional Alger hero. They also rose to success through diligence and application, but only by denying the values that Alger had affirmed. They attained temporary eminence and power, but their ultimate reward was invariably violent death. It would be a mistake to attribute these endings primarily to the censorship Hollywood was subject to, since the folk songs and tales about gangster heroes that remained so popular throughout the thirties ended in precisely the same way.

The classic gangster film was not merely about the individual but about organization. "We're gonna get organized," the boss in *Scarface* (1932) proclaims. "Running beer ain't a nickel game any more. It's a business and I'm gonna run it like a business!" As Robert Warshaw has pointed out, it is when the gangster is apart from his organization, when he is alone, that he is most vulnerable. *Scarface* begins with the death of the old boss, Big Louie, after the last of his henchmen have gone home, and it ends with the death of the new boss, Tony Camonte, alone with his sister and cut off from his mob by a police siege. "You can't go away," he begs his mortally wounded sister. "I'll be all alone. You can't leave me here all alone. . . . I'm no good by myself." Whatever truth emerged at his death, on his way up, Camonte felt and acted like a self-sustaining individual. Forming his fingers in the shape of a pistol and silently mouthing the word "bang," he tells his henchman the "only law" he follows: "Do it first! Do it yourself! And keep on doin' it!" He enjoys looking out of his apartment window at a huge Cook's Tours advertising sign featuring a revolving globe under which large neon letters proclaim: "THE WORLD IS YOURS." "Someday," Camonte vows, "I look at that sign and say: 'O.K. She's mine!'" The last shot of the movie focuses upon that sign blinking its mocking message high above the prostrate form of the dead gangster on the city streets below. Caesar Enrico Bandello, the central figure of *Little Caesar* (1930), suffers a similar fate. No other film gangster was modeled more closely on the traditional success figure. So self-absorbed is he that he can't believe his own demise. "Mother of Mercy, . . . is this the end of Rico?" he gasps as he dies beneath a billboard advertising the success of his old comrade who has forsaken a career in crime for one as a professional dancer.

like them, were about more than the death of a gangster. They were, on a number of levels, concerned with the demise of a tradition now shrouded in ambivalence and doubt, just as the gangster hero of *Public Enemy* (1931)—who was killed when he disobeyed the instructions of his boss and rashly confronted his rivals on his own—is returned to his family shrouded from head to toe in bandages, a mummified symbol of a time now gone.

Movie fan magazines, whose readership seems to have been largely female, provide another example of the ambivalence which surrounded the success ethos in the Depression. On the surface, the tradition appeared to be intact. *Photoplay* magazine illustrated its conviction that physical beauty was an act not of nature but of the will, through numerous conversion stories. Joan Crawford, who began with many physical defects, became a glamorous star through “a cold, hard will to work and succeed.” In twelve months Eleanor Powell “transformed herself from sheer ugliness into actual radiant beauty.” No matter what your problems, *Photoplay* sermonized, “you can—and you *must*—be attractive. Being attractive depends upon your personality. . . . *Be somebody.*” Beneath the surface, however, was the reality that most women, regardless of their efforts, could never become Joan Crawford. This tension was relieved in a simple formula: success brought unhappiness. Margaret Sullivan paid a terrible price for her fame: “unhappiness, deathly unhappiness, mental depression, and nervous torture.” Movie stars missed the simple real pleasures of life. “Concentration on work can anesthetize a woman’s natural reactions,” *Photoplay* concluded. “You always have to make a choice in a situation like this. Husband or career. Home and anonymity or success, money, fame.”

Such films as *Cleopatra* (1934), *Mary of Scotland* (1936), and *Elizabeth the Queen* (1939) came to the same conclusion. Refusing to betray the man she loves in order to save the throne she worked so hard to win, Cleopatra proclaims, “I’m no longer a queen. I’m a woman!” “Look well for love, look well, and not finding it, give nothing,” a dying Cleopatra proclaims. “But if blessed with Cleopatra’s fortune, give all!” The story of Queen Mary begins with a resolute woman determined to be queen, and ends with a softer being who finds fulfillment in her womanhood. “Let me live or die at your side,” she tells her husband. “I’m your wife. I love you. . . . What’s my throne? I’d put a torch to it for any one of the days I’ve had with you.” As she condemns her lover Essex to death, Queen Elizabeth tells him that she has learned from him “that no one can be trusted, a lover least of all. I will remember that.” “Take care, your Majesty,” Essex responds, “lest that be all you ever have to remember.” Choosing her throne over her man, the queen is left to wail, “I’m old! I’m old! With you I could have been young again.”

For the gangster, success ended in death; for the professional woman it

ended in unfulfillment; for many others it ended in the realization that success no longer meant merely the mastery of oneself but of the institutions that characterized the new society. This helps explain the widespread popularity of private detective novels and movies in the Great Depression. The private detective appeared to be much wiser and far more effective than the regular policemen because he was free, as they were not, to bypass institutional constraints and emulate the procedures of the criminal. Forced to operate within the law, the police were pictured as inefficient and incapable of coping with their adversaries.

This growing perception that it was less and less possible to achieve traditional ends through the existing system helped to give birth to a new folk figure in the late Depression years. In 1938, Superman made his first appearance in *Action Comics* and became the prototype of a host of heroes who were to become prominent in American culture. Jules Feiffer, the cartoonist and playwright, who was an avid young reader of comics in the 1930s, has left us a fine recollection of Superman’s emergence:

The problem in pre-super days was that, with few exceptions, heroes were not very interesting. . . . Villains, whatever fate befell them in the obligatory last panel, were infinitely better equipped than those silly, hapless heroes. Not only comics, but life taught us that. Those of us raised in ghetto neighborhoods were being asked to believe that crime didn’t pay? . . . Nice guys finished last; landlords, first. Villains . . . were miles ahead. It was not to be believed that any ordinary human could combat them. More was required. Someone with a call. When *Superman* at last appeared, he brought with him the deep satisfaction of all underground truths: our reaction was less, “How original!” than, “But, of course!”

Superman was important because his alter ego, his fake identity, Clark Kent, was a caricature of what individuals had become in an organized, depersonalized world: faceless, impotent, frustrated. Kent could transform himself by taking off his clothes; the rest of the society could react through the world of the mass media.

Fantasies, of course, were not new to the 1930s, but the nature of the prevailing fantasies is revealing. Superman had existed before in American culture. The super heroes of the mid-nineteenth century were concerned with overcoming the environment. Real people might have to struggle with the vastness of nature in America; their super fantasies, like the folk figures Mike Fink and Davy Crockett, did not: they could cross rivers in a single stride, uproot trees with a single yank, conquer wild animals with their bare hands. One hundred years later, the concern had shifted from the environment to the bureaucracy, from nature to society. The people of the 1930s might be confined by institutions, might have to respond to them, and through

them, but they could relieve their tensions and express their feelings through their super projections. Thus though Superman and his clones functioned with the consent of the law, they operated outside it. Nowhere is it recorded that Superman stopped for a search warrant before breaking down walls to capture the criminals. The popularity of Superman symbolized public unrest with the institutions and bureaucracies that more and more shaped the contours of everyday life.

Faced with a marked dissonance between the social goals they had been taught to work for and the inadequate means society provided for attaining those goals, Americans found a necessary outlet for their anguish in the dynamic humor of the Great Depression, which in fact proved to be one of the most creative periods of humor in our history. The distrust of institutions, the sense that the world no longer worked as it was supposed to, that the old verities and certainties no longer held sway, was expressed in one of the decade's most ubiquitous forms of humor: the humor of irrationality. In their popular radio program, *Easy Aces*, which was broadcast three times a week, Jane and Goodman Ace made frequent use of this form of wit, as in the following dialogue from the 1932–1933 season:

JANE: I wish we would go to Los Angeles for our vacation this summer.

ACE: All right—anything you say—

JANE: That's what you said last summer—you said we would go to Los Angeles and we didn't go any place.

ACE: No, no, last summer we didn't go to Europe. It was the summer before we didn't go to Los Angeles. It gets monotonous not going to the same place every year. Let's not go up to Lake Louise, around Banff—mighty pretty country around there, they tell me.

JANE: No, I like Los Angeles.

ACE: All right—then we won't go to Los Angeles—have it your way—and let's plan on not going about the last two weeks in August—that'll be about the most inconvenient time for me to get away. How does that strike you?

One could be certain of nothing in the humor of the thirties. In one of their most famous routines, Abbot endeavors to prove to Costello that he is not there: “Are you in St. Louis? “No.” “Are you in Chicago?” “Of course not.” “Well, if you're not in St. Louis and you're not in Chicago, you must be somewhere else.” “Ye-es.” “Well, then, if you're somewhere else, you're not here.” No one demonstrated the illogic of logic, the fragility of certainty, more surely than the Marx Brothers, in whose madcap anarchy one gets a glimpse of the decade's travail. Even before the full advent of the Depression, Groucho was tilting his lance at the economic system. Confronted by his employees demanding their wages in *The Cocoanuts* (1929)

he asks if they want to be wage slaves and when they reply in the negative, he cries out, “No, of course not! Well, what makes wage slaves? Wages! I want you to be free. . . . Be free, my friends, one for all and all for me and me for you and three for five and six for a quarter.” The surrealism increased with the deepening crisis. “Pick a number from one to ten,” Groucho instructs Chico in *Duck Soup* (1933). “Eleven,” replies Chico. “Right,” declares Groucho. In *Animal Crackers* (1930), Groucho is quick to agree when a pompous conservative observes that “The nickel is not worth what it used to be ten years ago”:

I'll go further than that. . . . Do you know what this country needs today? A seven-cent nickel. Yes sirree, we've been using five-cent nickels in this country since 1492 and that's pretty near a hundred years daylight saving. Now why not give the seven-cent nickel a chance? If that works out, next year we could have an eight-cent nickel. Think what that would mean. You could go to a news stand, buy a three-cent newspaper and get the same nickel back again. One nickel carefully used would last a family a lifetime!

The thirties' assault on American truisms took place on all levels of humor. “A penny saved,” Ogden Nash observed, “is—impossible.” James Thurber revised another American proverb in his fable, “The Shrike and the Chipmunks,” in which Mrs. Chipmunk forces her husband out of bed, insisting: “You can't be healthy if you lie in bed all day and never get any exercise.” She takes him for a walk during which they are caught and killed by a shrike. “*Moral: Early to rise and early to bed makes a male healthy and wealthy and dead.*” W. C. Fields added to the confusion by commenting, “Any man who hates dogs and children can't be all bad.” And Mae West boasted, in her version of the well-known children's rhyme, “When I'm good I'm very, very good, but when I'm bad I'm better.”

In 1937, *Gone with the Wind* was the year's best-selling work of fiction while *How to Win Friends and Influence People* headed the nonfiction lists. A decade in which a book heralding the virtues of the past as a model for the present, and one which taught the techniques of adjustment necessary for the conquest of the future, could be *simultaneously* the most popular books, is not an easy decade to sum up. That, of course, has been one of the points of this essay. The attempt to answer one question—why did the American people react as they did in the early years of the Great Depression?—has led us into a complex world of conflicting urges: a world that looked to the past even as it began to assume the contours of the future; a world in which a crisis in values accompanied the crisis in the economy; a world of special interest to historians because the normal process of cumu-

lative and barely perceptible change was expedited and made more visible by the presence of prolonged crisis.

The purpose of this essay has been to scratch the surface of that world and to suggest that however central politics was to the Depression decade, it needs to be seen in the total context of Depression culture. There can be no attempt to understand the Great Depression and its effect upon our own society without attempting to understand the reactions and attitudes of the American people, and there can be no understanding of the American people without a serious attempt to understand the everyday culture they were exposed to and interacted with.