

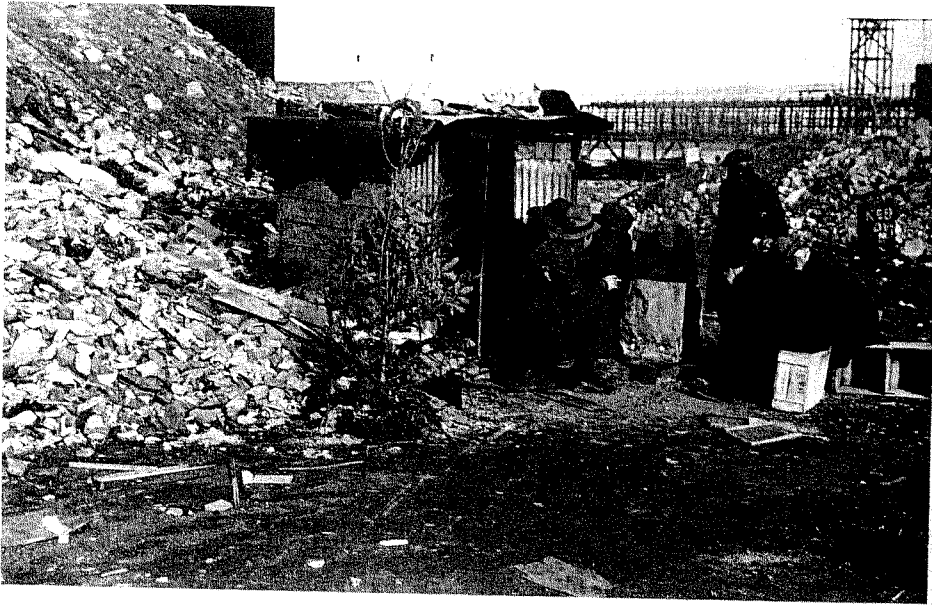
# THE GREAT DEPRESSION

America, 1929–1941

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## 9·Moral Economics: American Values and Culture in the Great Depression



Values constitute a turf on which many historians feel uncomfortable. Values, though, as English social historian Edward Thompson has pointed out, “are not ‘imponderables’ which the historians can safely dismiss with the reflection that since they are not amenable to measurement, anyone’s opinion is as good as anyone else’s.” Rather, values are the critical base on which any society rests. Such values build up over a long period of time, but they are far from being unchange-

able. As circumstances change, so do a society’s values. New values, however, do not arise out of thin air; they are grounded in the past experiences and beliefs of a people. Any society is likely to have several groups of values from which to choose in reaction to given historical circumstances. These sets of beliefs need not be consistent; their usefulness for dealing with different situations is partially dependent on their being at least somewhat contradictory. Finally, it should be noted that the fundamental beliefs of one segment of a society may differ substantially from those of another portion of the same nation. The values of farmers, for instance, might differ from those of city dwellers, those of one ethnic group from another, or those of industrial workers from those of their employers.

In traditional societies there has usually been a basic belief that economic arrangements should be based upon some concept of morality. One of the distinguishing marks of modern capitalism, on the other hand, has been the divorce of economics from ethics. Professor Thompson has noted that the adoption of the political economy that came to be associated with the name of Adam Smith, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “entailed a demoralizing of the theory of trade and consumption.” Smith, who called himself a moral philosopher, advocated a *laissez-faire* approach because he believed it would produce the greatest benefits for all and so *was* moral. “No society,” Adam Smith declared, “can surely be flourishing and happy, of which by far the greater part of the numbers are poor and miserable.” Smith condemned “the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of the merchants and manufacturers,” who he said ought not be “the rulers of mankind.” All of this, however, was quickly forgotten by apologists for the rapacious merchants and manufacturers. Such successors as David Ricardo and Jeremy Bentham quickly abandoned Smith’s standard of morality. “Society to Adam Smith,” Robert Heilbroner has noted, “was a great family; to Ricardo it was a bitter contest for supremacy.” The marketplace came to be seen by most classical economists as a natural realm in which morality had no place. It was not *immoral*, but *amoral*. The results of the free play of the market might sometimes be harsh, but nothing could be done about it. The unrestricted marketplace was not *an* economic system; it was *the* economic system. One might as well try to regulate the weather as attempt to regulate the economy. Such meddling—even though well intentioned—could only make things worse.

It is a bit of marvelous historical coincidence that Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was published in the same year, 1776, that the United States declared its independence. This country has, for a variety of reasons, always been the preeminent home of *laissez faire*. As a “virgin land,” America had from the first been seen as a place of opportunity to start over, without the evils of “decadent” European society. The settlement of the English colonies in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries coincided with

the height of Western civilization's fascination with natural law and natural right philosophies. What better place to restore human society to harmony with the natural order than in the pristine New World?

Adam Smith's "invisible hand," as the economic counterpart of the natural order, was especially appealing to Americans, who already valued their "natural" existence. This view was so generally accepted in the new United States because property ownership was believed to be relatively widespread. If the hope existed (as it did in the minds of such American thinkers as Thomas Jefferson) that most men could become small property holders, then it would be possible to have an economic order that was basically fair but without significant government interference. Nineteenth-century American liberalism rested on this assumption. All the independent American needed or wanted was "a free field and no favor." "Equal rights for all; special privileges for none" was the Jacksonian refrain.

But if these beliefs were based upon the assumption of a wide distribution of productive property (and they *were* so based), how could they apply in an industrial society in which the ownership of productive property was becoming ever more concentrated? To late-nineteenth-century industrialists and their intellectual defenders, there seemed no problem. The system was the system. Individualism was the American way. Social Darwinism supplemented the doctrines of laissez faire (and completed the subversion of the connection Adam Smith had tried to make between laissez faire and morality). "On every ground and at every point," social Darwinist William Graham Sumner declared, "the domain of social science must be defended against the alleged authority of ethical dicta." This was fine for an emerging industrial and financial elite who wanted people to believe that their dominance was "natural," but what of the growing multitudes of propertyless workers? Did they continue to adhere to the standards of Smithean political economy while they suffered from its effects?

Until recently, it was believed that workers in this country accepted the dominant American values associated with individualism. Workers, many labor historians told us, were "wage and job conscious," they sought individual success, did not know the meaning of "enough," and like other Americans, worshiped at the altars of Adam Smith, Horatio Alger, and Andrew Carnegie, if not that of Herbert Spencer. The placing of such emphasis on individualism, I believe, is not so much incorrect as it is misleading.

Most Americans, workers included, have tended toward individualism. To say this, however, is to say very little, because individualism has meant different things to Americans of different classes and in different historical eras. The acquisitive, social Darwinian form of individualism so often associated with the businessmen of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America was not the individualism that held a place of primacy in the value system of American workers, at least not before the 1920s.

American workers in the period between the Civil War and World War I, labor historian David Montgomery has argued, developed and maintained "popular values antagonistic to acquisitive individualism." Labor reformers in the nineteenth century sought "to impose moral order on the market economy," Montgomery contends. They had a "revulsion toward the consecration of 'selfishness and individualism.'" Other recent labor historians have reached similar conclusions.

Yet to speak, as Montgomery and others do, of a "mutualist ethic" among American workers does not seem quite to hit the mark either. Surely most American workers have rejected the degree of collectivism implicit in that term. The difficulty lies in the juxtaposition of individualism and "mutuality." These are not either/or categories of complete egoism on the one hand and selflessness on the other. Rather, there is a continuum between these extremes. Too often, we tend to think that people must be *either* competitive *or* cooperative. As historian Lawrence Goodwyn has shown, the Populists of the late nineteenth century understood that humankind is *both* competitive *and* cooperative. Both tendencies can coexist within a single individual. Which takes precedence depends in large measure on external conditions.

The key to unlocking the puzzle of individualism versus mutuality is the concept of *independence*. A notion of common interests developed alongside the desire for independence among nineteenth-century American workers. The quest for independence was not rooted in simple acquisitiveness. American working-class values were based upon another sort of individualism: the belief that *each* individual, not just oneself, has rights to be respected; the belief that the measure of a policy or action is its effect on individual human beings, not its result on the balance sheet. Within this framework, workers could, like other Americans, seek success. They could even admire those who achieved it, but *only* if that success was achieved "fairly."

The individualism of American workers was not the amoral individualism of Bentham or Sumner. It was, instead, an individualism distinguished from selfishness. The line may seem a fine one, but the distinction is crucial. American workers sought independence and so were "self-reliant." But they believed as well in justice, equity, cooperation, and what Edward Thompson has called "human reciprocity."

The terminology I am using here is unlikely to be familiar to most readers, but I believe that these distinctions in value systems are essential to comprehending the Great Depression. I shall therefore try to make clearer what I am getting at. We all have our own personal interests and are concerned with our own well-being and our own ambitions. This is not the point. One can be an individual without being an individualist. Philosopher Sidney Hook made the distinction well in 1936 when he noted that Marxism "is hostile to individualism as a social theory, not to individuality as a social value." We can all subscribe to individuality as a social value; it is the social theory of individual-

ism that American workers failed to accept fully. That sort of individualism is based on egoism, that is, the “regard to one’s own interest as the supreme guiding principle of action; systematic selfishness.” Just as individualism as a philosophy must be distinguished from individuality as a social value, so egoism as a philosophy should not be confused with an egotistical person. One can be personally self-centered to a high degree and still reject the philosophy of egoism. It is a question of whether one advances himself while considering the needs of others or ignoring them. “A good man’s egotism,” as Sir Charles Sherrington has put it, “. . . is altruism.”

Similarly, the terms “amoral marketplace economics” and “moral economics” should be understood to apply to fundamental beliefs about the basis upon which economies ought to be organized. The terms have no necessary connections with personal codes of behavior. Those who believe in letting the unfettered market economy take its course may be very moral on a personal level; they may attend church regularly, be faithful to their spouses, and kind to dogs and small children. But when it comes to the overall operations of the economy, they insist that morality has no place, that nothing should be done to interfere with the “natural” and “impartial” workings of the marketplace. It is an idea as old as the American republic. In his *Federalist* Number 10, James Madison contended that “the rights of property originate” from “the diversity in the faculties of men,” and “different and unequal faculties of acquiring property” lead to people possessing it in “differing degrees. . . . The protection of these faculties,” Madison insisted, “is the first object of government.” In the midst of the Panic of 1893, Charles Kendall Adams, president of the University of Wisconsin, told his students: “In a vast number, if not a majority of cases, suffering has come from improvidence, from extravagance, or from dissipation.” Such a belief has been self-serving for most of those who have subscribed to it. They are the “winners,” and if they believe that the economic game is being played by the proper rules—the *only* rules—they can be self-righteous about their own success and indifferent to the plight of the “losers.” As F. Scott Fitzgerald pointed out, one of the worst characteristics of some among the upper classes is that they are “careless.” They feel justified in holding the losers in contempt, in blaming them for their own problems, in telling them that they could find work if they really wanted to. Losers in a perfect, self-regulating system are, by definition, unworthy; they are not “truly needy.”

One further caveat: I am not saying that *all* believers in *laissez faire* insist that morality has no place in economics. Some of them, including Adam Smith, would argue that this *is* moral economics. But most *laissez-faire* advocates since the early nineteenth century have contended that economics is a science—a “dismal” one, perhaps, but a science nonetheless—not a branch of moral philosophy. “Ordinary” folks have never been quite convinced of this.

Americans are basically pragmatic; as long as the marketplace seems to work, they go along with it. But it works to different degrees for different groups. It has been easy for those who have “won” in the marketplace to defend it as a perfect, self-regulating mechanism in which morality has no role. Those who have not succeeded, though, have clung to the notion that the ultimate justification for an economic policy must be rooted in its moral consequences. The “individualism” of workers has always had ethical and cooperative components, while the individualism of conservative businessmen has tended to be amoral, acquisitive, and egoistical. This is not to say that poor working people are inherently “better” than the rich. The poor, like the rich, favor what is best for them. Cooperation can be mutually beneficial. A degree of cooperation and a government moved by compassion are in the interests of workers, much as acquisitive individualism and an unrestricted marketplace feed the self-interest of the successful. That each approach serves the interests of the group more likely to advocate it, however, does not mean that they are ethically equivalent positions. The self-interest of workers happens to coincide with values of justice and compassion.

The interplay between the egoistical, amoral individualism of the owning class and the ethical individualism of most workers is essential to understanding many facets of American history. Workers in some periods could seek to gain independence by becoming individual proprietors, hence the emphasis of the Jacksonians on the interests of farmers and small businessmen. At other times, cooperatives appeared to be the best hope. The seeming paradox of the existence of so many cooperative movements—New Harmony, Oneida, the Fourierist and Shaker communities of the early nineteenth century, and the cooperative efforts of the Knights of Labor and the Farmers’ Alliances of the late nineteenth century, to name a few—in individualistic America is resolved when we realize that ethical individualists could easily see cooperatives as the best means of fairly advancing the interests of individual workers, of achieving independence.

American workers have always lived in a society in which they were confronted with a set of antagonistic values—those of the marketplace economy. These values were persistently pushed upon workers, since their acceptance of classical political economy and their belief in Alger-style success would keep the owning class safely in power (and since many in the owning class sincerely *believed* in these values).

Very broadly speaking, there have been two opposing sets of values in America. Both are individualistic; but one emphasizes cooperation, the other competition. The categories are far from absolute, but workers have tended to move toward cooperative individualism and businessmen toward acquisitive individualism. Aspects of American history can be illuminated by the realization that our vast middle class has been pulled toward one or the other of these poles, depending on the particular historical circumstances. During periods

of liberalism—such as the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the 1960s—the cooperative values have been in the ascendancy; during times of conservatism—the late nineteenth century is a good example—the acquisitive ethic has dominated. Similarly, during times of relative prosperity, many in the middle class have tried to emulate those above them on the social scale and so adopted their values. The 1920s, 1950s, and 1970s are the leading examples of such periods in the twentieth century. During hard times, on the other hand, many in the middle class have identified with the working class. The significance of these general tendencies for the Depression decade is, of course, that it was a time *both* of liberalism and of economic collapse.

But in the preceding decade, when prosperity combined with a swing of the pendulum to the right, considerable headway was made—through advertising, installment purchase plans, a rising living standard, and a new emphasis on consumerism—toward weaning workers from their traditional values and remolding them into acquisitive, amoral individualists. “Observers were struck,” Irving Bernstein has written of the twenties, “with the materialism that permeated all levels of American society, including labor; workers shared with their bosses a devout reverence for the almighty dollar.”<sup>1</sup>

The relative success of the “hard sell” of marketplace economics and materialistic individualism in the 1920s was based upon prosperity. The owning-class values that had made gains among workers in that decade had their material props slashed from beneath them in 1929 and subsequently. By the early 1930s, it was plain to most pragmatic Americans that the marketplace economy was not living up to its promises.

Often intellectuals find themselves at cross purposes with the popular mood. So it certainly was for the American intelligentsia in the 1920s. They condemned the materialism, egoism, and philistinism of a nation of “Babbitts.” Many American thinkers and writers in the twenties went so far as to remove themselves from the society in which they felt so alienated.

The immense social and economic forces of the Great Depression, however, pushed intellectuals and common folk in similar directions. They rarely met, but they traveled essentially parallel courses in the thirties. Intellectuals and Depression victims alike criticized the effects of capitalism, although the latter did not often use such explicit terms. The Depression rapidly undermined many old values and, for a time at least, the American Dream itself. The economic collapse called, at a minimum, for a readjustment in values. Some intellectuals in search of new values turned to an idealization of peasant societies or regional agrarianism in the United States. More turned to the legacy of Karl Marx. What they all had in common was a search for a life of community and sharing, as opposed to the acquisitive individualism of modern industrial capitalism.

In the Cold War–McCarthy period, the decade of the thirties was known as the Red Decade. The image originated, in fact, at the time. In 1934 publisher William Randolph Hearst launched what he hoped would be a new Red Scare. He sent spies onto university campuses to ferret out “red” professors and believed he found them at New York University. Hearst also worried about reds in Washington, charging that the Roosevelt administration was “more communistic than the communists.” The year 1934 also saw the appearance of a strange book called *The Red Network* by Elizabeth Dilling. It made its contribution to the cause by listing some 1300 red conspirators, ranging from the predictable Eleanor Roosevelt to the startling Mohandas Gandhi and Chiang Kai-shek. Taken together, the charges of Hearst, Dilling, and other “100 percent Americans” in the mid-thirties made the anti-Communist crusade laughable.

But it was not yet over. In 1938 the House of Representatives created a Special Committee on Un-American Activities. The intent of most of those voting to establish the committee appears to have been to investigate the activities of American fascists and Nazi agents in the United States. Committee chairman Martin Dies of Texas, however, was not worried about fascists. He was interested only in the actions of Communists and New Dealers, categories that he saw as largely indistinguishable. Such fascist groups as the Silver Shirts, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Knights of the White Camelia were soon applauding the work of a committee originally intended to investigate them.

In 1941 the title of a book written by Eugene Lyons, *The Red Decade*, kept alive a distorted notion of America in the Depression. In the Cold War climate of the late 1940s and 1950s, the belief that Communists were prominent in the New Deal, as well as on college campuses and in CIO unions, spread widely. As McCarthyism grew in the early fifties, views of the role of Marxism in Depression America became even more distorted. Liberals and defenders of the New Deal felt constrained not only to show that the Roosevelt administration was not riddled with Communists, but also that the New Deal was not influenced by Marxism and that *they*, the New Deal liberals, were fully cognizant of the Communist threat. Thus the three volumes of Arthur Schlesinger’s otherwise admirable *The Age of Roosevelt* written in the 1950s suffer from a Cold War mentality that seeks to escape the condemnation of the remnants of McCarthyism. Schlesinger allows that there was an “undue complacency about Communism” in the United States in the late thirties. In a chapter entitled “Growth of a Conspiracy,” he says that “the Communist conspiracy” was “a great potential danger to American democracy.”

Such assessments greatly overstate the “threat” of Soviet espionage in the thirties. Surely such activities did exist, but there was nothing approaching a dangerous conspiracy. More serious than the overestimation of the conspiracy, though, is the denigration of the importance of Marxist ideas in the

decade. In reference to the thirties' radical intellectuals, Schlesinger says: "All shared a profound conviction that, though Karl Marx might have been a formidable social thinker, Marxism in general . . . [was] irrelevant to the United States." This assertion is mistaken. With the exception of some CIO unions, the influence of the Communist party itself was never very great in Depression America, but Marxist *ideas* were very important; indeed, they played a significant role in advancing the cooperative values of the period.

Many American intellectuals were attracted to "Marxism" in the thirties, but there was little agreement over precisely what that meant. Even before the purges of the later thirties and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, few Americans approved of Stalinism. Some joined the Communist party or at least endorsed its candidates. In September 1932, fifty-two writers, critics, and professors, including Sherwood Anderson, Erskine Caldwell, Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Waldo Frank, Granville Hicks, Sidney Hook, Langston Hughes, Lincoln Steffens, and Edmund Wilson, signed an open letter indicating their support for Communist presidential candidate William Z. Foster. The Communists, critic Edmund Wilson said admiringly, "are people who are willing to die for a religion." But few prominent American intellectuals could long tolerate the requirements of the party. Like most of their countrymen, they found the Communists too dogmatic, too authoritarian, and, perhaps, too foreign. Many American intellectuals did like Marxism, though, for its emphasis on class conflict, its explanation of the crises of capitalism, its call for action and personal commitment, and its (at least in their view) moral condemnation of acquisitive individualism. To a considerable extent, Marxism in Depression America was in the eye of the beholder. Each intellectual refashioned the ideas of Marx as he wanted them and then liked what he created.

The Great Depression seemed to many intellectuals who had long been estranged from American bourgeois society a wonderful opportunity to develop new values. Before the Crash, writers were already deeply disturbed by the paradox of technological improvements making conditions worse for large segments of the population. "The better we are able to produce," Stuart Chase wrote in *The New Republic* early in 1929, "the worse off we will be. This is the economy of a mad-house." The Depression confirmed what many intellectuals had been saying for years: an economy built upon acquisitiveness and competition was destructive economically, socially, and psychologically. Samuel Schmalhausen, the associate editor of the Marxist journal *Modern Quarterly*, wrote in 1932 that the American economic system had made a "fetish of individualism," leading to the "dominance of the ego in the affairs of men." The result was a "sick" society. In the early thirties, many among the intelligentsia agreed with him. Capitalism, Sidney Hook maintained, had made man "the basis of society, not social man, but egoistic man." The old

economic system, Hook insisted, degraded people and ideas alike "by setting a cash value on them."

The Depression led many intellectuals into believing that some sort of social and ideological apocalypse was at hand. In this sense, it was a thrilling time to be alive. The old world was collapsing and the chance was there to take a hand in molding a new one. The American Dream had turned into a nightmare. Progress, always a central icon in the American secular faith, no longer seemed viable. As they rejected the greed and materialism they associated with American capitalism, scores of leading thinkers turned to Marx for a possible new value system. Marxism was "in the air" in intellectual circles in the thirties, and its spirit was in harmony with the values developing among much of the general public. Intellectuals of all persuasions had to acknowledge the importance and apparent relevance of Marxist thought to the Depression. Marxist vocabulary was in common usage among the thinkers and writers of the decade. Marxists, after all, had predicted the economic collapse and had an explanation for it. Moreover, the Depression left many people feeling that they were being buffeted by powerful forces beyond their control. This lent credibility to the Marxist concept of determinism. Marxism seemed to many in the American intelligentsia of the thirties to support their own moral condemnations of the marketplace economy and to uphold the values of community, justice, and cooperation that so many writers of the period favored.

The goal was, as progressive historian Charles Beard put it in 1935, the "subordination of personal ambition and greed to common plans and purposes." For some (fortunately, not many) as the American Dream faded, it was simply a matter of replacing it with the Russian Dream. The Soviet experiment came to be seen in some quarters as another Puritan "City Upon a Hill." But Joseph Stalin was ill-cast as John Winthrop. Most Americans attracted to Marx soon concluded that they must follow the advice of Edmund Wilson and "take Communism away from the Communists." Marx must be "Americanized."

Through articles in such popular liberal journals as *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, in a host of little magazines—including *Partisan Review*, *Common Sense*, *Science and Society*, *Modern Quarterly*, *Symposium*, and *Miscellany*—and in their books, such intellectuals as Sidney Hook, Edmund Wilson, John Dewey, Philip Rahv, Lewis Mumford, Robert Lynd, Max Eastman, and Reinhold Niebuhr attempted in the thirties to blend parts of Marxism with the best of the American liberal tradition. They were appalled at the values of the marketplace economy that took away "all sense of social responsibility" and led the individual, in Mumford's words, to "compensate by ego-centric getting and spending for the absence of collective institutions and a collective aim." But collectivism to these men did not mean the dissolution of

the individual into the mass. On the contrary, Dewey, Hook, Lynd, and others saw socialism as a way to provide the economic security necessary for people to be truly free to express their individuality. Sidney Hook, historian Richard Pells points out, saw Marxism "as a natural extension of ideals that had their roots firmly in the liberal tradition." The intellectuals called for what Niebuhr referred to as "equal justice" and a redistribution of wealth and income to the "disinherited." But they wanted to maintain a large degree of freedom as well.

In all these respects, the leftist intellectuals were basically in tune with the values of the public and the aspirations of the New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt often employed the same class-oriented rhetoric and symbols that the leftists used. The intellectuals were calling for a liberal socialism while FDR was offering a social liberalism. There *were* important differences, but ordinary folks could be forgiven for having difficulty telling them apart and taking what they could get. Both sets of beliefs, after all, were grounded in the moral economic value system that became dominant in Depression America.<sup>2</sup>

Ethical themes were abundant in the letters of Depression victims. "I am in great distress and want," a California man wrote to the President in 1934. "I realize that in the United States, there is enough for all, but on account of selfishness and greed, some are getting, while others are not." "How people can sit down at a banquet and enjoy themselves when millions are going to bed hungry is more than I can understand," said one of Mrs. Roosevelt's correspondents. "Some Gets any thing they want and Some None," a Kansas man complained in a 1934 letter to one of his senators. "[A]ll i want is a square deal," he continued, "i dont want it all Give Every Body a Chance to live Some Lay money up and some going Hungry." "This nation could be made an ideal place to live," a Minneapolis man wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt, "if every one would work together for the common good of every one instead of for selfish purposes." "How about the person who has" been generally unemployed for years "and the one who has had steady, regular employment all the time at a good salary, changing places for a while?" an unemployed Arkansan suggested to Harry Hopkins in 1935. "It seems fair that all get some of the pie."

Specific complaints people made in their letters to the Roosevelts and to government officials often indicated the same resurgence of values based on equity and fairness. This was clearly the case with the common protests concerning the injustice of giving clerical and administrative jobs in relief agencies to those who could "afford to buy fur coats, spend their money on fancy clothes and worthless items of luxury." These positions should instead be "filled by men and women who need the money for their families and their homes." A Nebraska WPA worker wrote Hopkins in 1936 that "it is the rich and not the poor that get the jobs. We are just as capable of doing the work as they are and maybe do the work and not be uptown all hours of the day."

In addition to complaining about who got the good jobs in relief agencies, many workers objected to "higher-ups" being paid too much. "Can't some of these high salaries be cut just a wee bit so the Money allocated for salaries will be more evenly divided," an Ohio "House Wife" asked the President in 1935. "F.D.R. you aprobated [appropriated] it for us Workers. And we want it and are protesting to you," wrote a group of Birmingham WPA workers. "No one is getting the Money but the bosses formons and head mens We workers are not getting it every turn we hafter loose and the big mens gaines." "The big mens are taking it all for them selves," they continued. "You have aprobated it for us where do it go[?]"

Several of the Depression survivors Studs Terkel interviewed in the 1960s recalled a spirit of cooperation among the poor. "A lot of times one family would have some food," Mary Owsley said. "They would divide. And every-one would share." Her daughter, Peggy Terry, expressed the same idea: "But there was a feeling of together." "Black and white, it didn't make any difference who you were," Louis Banks said of hoboes in the Depression, "'cause everybody was poor. All friendly. . . ." And Kitty McCulloch remembered giving away her husband's best suit "to a man who had such shabby clothes." Her husband, she explained, "had three other suits and he didn't have any. So I gave it to him."

That such sentiments were widespread was confirmed by early scientific opinion polls. Nearly 60 percent of the poor questioned in a 1935 *Fortune* survey said that the government should not "allow a man who has investments worth over a million dollars to keep them." (It is not surprising that almost 70 percent of the "prosperous" believed that such wealthy individuals should be left alone.) In the fall of 1937 more than 42 percent of the poor in another *Fortune* poll said that "the federal government should follow a policy of taking money from those who have much and giving money to those who have little." When those who favored such a program "if it doesn't go too far" are included, more than 64 percent of the poor endorsed redistribution.<sup>3</sup>

The Depression-bred values evident in letters and opinion polls were strikingly reflected in the popular culture of the 1930s. This is a realm that has attracted serious historical study only in quite recent years. Further, it is an area in which it may seem difficult to find much convincing evidence about a society's values. Assuming that it is possible to isolate such underlying themes in a movie, book, or song, what does it tell us? Perhaps it provides information about the beliefs of the director, author, or lyricist; but many of us are understandably hesitant to draw conclusions from mass culture about the culture of the masses. Pete Seeger made the point well when he told me, paraphrasing his father, "Music can be made *for* people, *for* the working class, by Tin Pan Alley; and movies can be made *for* the working class by Hollywood. But when it comes to songs made *by* the working class, then you have to look

a little harder in this mass production age." Such questions are easier to deal with for an earlier time. Folk culture clearly came from the folk and can more readily be accepted as conveying the values of the segment of the society from which it arises.

Popular culture must be used cautiously in any attempt to get at popular values. But if the same sorts of beliefs and attitudes that are found in the statements, actions, and votes of people in a given historical context emerge repeatedly in the popular entertainment of the day, additional confirmation of those values has been found. Such was decidedly the case in Depression America.

Although music, radio, books, magazines, comics, sports, and other forms of mass entertainment were all significant in the thirties, nothing else was as central to American popular culture in that decade as motion pictures. There are good reasons for concentrating attention on Hollywood. Movies were the preeminent form of popular culture in the 1930s. Almost everyone who could afford to (and millions who could not) went to the cinema frequently throughout the decade. During the depths of the Depression in the early thirties, an average of 60 million to 75 million movie tickets were purchased each week. Although part of this remarkable figure represented repeat customers, the number itself corresponds to more than 60 percent of the entire American population. (This compares to a number of weekly movie admissions by the late 1970s equaling less than 10 percent of the population.) Hollywood made more than 5000 feature films during the 1930s. Up to a point, film producers had to reflect changes in popular attitudes. They were guided by the profit motive and so had an incentive to give moviegoers what they wanted to see. Many contemporaries were convinced that film was the most powerful medium of the time. Immediately after the stock market crash, for instance, New York Mayor Jimmy Walker asked movie operators to "show pictures which will reinstate courage and hope in the hearts of the people." If any form of popular culture can shed light on a people's values, surely the Depression-era cinema is the most likely candidate. My perceptions are based on a study of nearly 150 films of the period, including many of the most popular and significant ones.

The most common impression about movies in the Great Depression is that they served as escapism. Depression victims—and those who feared they might soon be such—could pay their dime or quarter and forget the troubles of the real world for a few hours. Of course this is true. It is undeniable that movies provided a temporary escape for millions during the Depression. But they did far more than that. It was, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has rightly said, a time "When the Movies Really Counted," when they were "near the operative center of the nation's consciousness."

In his history of the films of Depression America, *We're in the Money*,

Andrew Bergman insists that the movies of the period served to reinforce the success ethic and values of what I have here termed acquisitive individualism. "Dehumanizing competition," Bergman contends, was glorified in most thirties films. The only exception he finds is King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* (1934). That film glorifies life on a collective farm and favorably portrays the whole idea of cooperative living. Bergman is right in singling out *Our Daily Bread* for its powerful plea for cooperation and even collectivism, but I think he is quite wrong in suggesting that most films made during the Depression carried a message extolling the virtues of competitive individualism. On the contrary, movie audiences were able to take away from many thirties productions reinforcement of the moral economic values that they were developing on their own.

The first—and most enduring—of the popular genres of the Depression years, the gangster film, makes the point clearly. These movies have generally been taken to have represented one of several viewpoints. Bergman argues that they provided a vehicle for the traditional American story of individual success. Robert Warshow, on the other hand, in his highly perceptive 1948 essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," maintains that the ultimate message of the gangster film is that in modern, individualistic, success-oriented society "there is really only one possibility—failure." The gangster, many critics have pointed out, is a figure with whom audiences identified, particularly in the early Depression years. "[T]he gangster speaks for us," Warshow says, "expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself."

The criminal must either represent the American success ethic or its rejection. We cannot have it both ways. Or can we? "We gain the double satisfaction," Warshow points out, "of participating vicariously in the gangster's sadism and then seeing it turned against the gangster himself." The gangster "is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become." This insight provides the key to understanding how the public perceived the gangster movie in the early Depression. Americans have always had a love/hate attitude toward individual success. On the one hand, we have a burning desire to succeed; on the other, we despise the successful man who steps on others to get ahead. This amounts to a different way of stating the conflict between the competing American value systems: acquisitive individualism *versus* cooperative or ethical individualism. In a period like the 1920s, the worship of success takes precedence; but in the Depression many Americans concluded, as Warshow put it, "the successful man is an outlaw."

The prototype of the early thirties gangster genre—and its most important example—was *Little Caesar* (1930). Contrary to the popular assumption that the gangster is a film character with which the audience identifies, the central character of this film, Caesar "Rico" Bandello (Edward G. Robinson), is any-



thing but sympathetic. His goals are to make money and, even more, to “be somebody,” to be in a position to tell others what to do. Rico destroys anything and anyone who stands in the way of his advancement. He is the epitome of the self-centered, acquisitive man, one who will use any means of “competition” to eliminate (often literally) his rivals. In short, Little Caesar stood in the eyes of early Depression audiences (the movie was released in January 1931) as the symbol of the amoral, greedy businessman. For those who may have missed the connection, Rico makes it explicit as he arrives in the upper reaches of crime: “Yeah, I ain’t doin’ so bad in this business, so far,” he tells his associate. The equation of crime and business was one that Depression viewers appreciated (so much so that in 1933 critic Dwight MacDonald called *Little Caesar* “the most successful talkie that has yet been made in this country”).

The message Depression-era audiences were likely to carry away from *Little Caesar* was quite the opposite of reinforcement of the individual success ethic. The film could instead be seen as an implicit condemnation of the amoral marketplace values that dominated the preceding decade. In his drive for the top, Rico has no truck with compassion or human values. “Love, soft stuff!” he says disgustedly to his friend Joe Masara. Rico realizes that the man on the make cannot be soft; he must be able to “dish it out” and “take it.” Rico’s collapse (like that of American business) is even more rapid than his rise, and begins because of his insistence that Joe must come back to work with him. Although Rico says “this is what I get for liking a guy too much,” his real motive was to control Joe and protect himself. Selfishness, not friendship (despite the homosexual undertones in the movie), leads to Rico’s demise. As he dies in a shootout—beneath a billboard announcing Joe’s success as a performer—Caesar utters his famous last words: “Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?” The obligatory end for the gangster has arrived. The prophecy at the film’s outset, where Matthew is quoted (“For those who live by the sword shall also die by the sword”), seems fulfilled. What is often overlooked, however, is that Little Caesar never quite reached the top. One step above him was the head of the city’s criminals, appropriately called Big Boy. (“I never saw anybody the Big Boy couldn’t get to,” says Little Arnie Lorch. “He can fix anything. That’s why he’s the Big Boy.”) The audience—or at least that part of it that noticed—was left with the message that the biggest gangster of them all continues to thrive. The implications for the “big boys” of the economic system in the thirties was apparent.

The same sort of implicit attack on the amoral methods of acquisitive individualism was evident in other films of the early Depression. Chester Morris, the central character in *Corsair* (1931), wants to show his girlfriend that he is “as good a businessman” as her father, who is a stockbroker. To do so, he becomes a pirate! Chester sums up the view of business ethics that was rapidly

gaining acceptance in these years: “It doesn’t matter how you make your money, it’s how much you have when you quit.”

But all gangsters in the movies were not alike. If Robinson’s Rico was not the sort with whom the viewer was likely to identify, the same could hardly be said of James Cagney as Tommy Powers in *Public Enemy* (1931). Here is the other side of the ambivalence toward the anarchic criminal figure. Viewers could identify with Powers not only because Cagney portrayed a more likable fellow than did Robinson, but because the Cagney character was not entirely self-centered. Powers and another character, Paddy Ryan, are obviously “good” mobsters. “Nobody can do much without somebody else,” Ryan says. There is some indication in the movie that Tommy became a criminal because of societal injustice, although this is not explored. In any event, Tom Powers believes in “justice” of a sort—in honor among thieves. He does not go around killing people for fun. (Rico usually had some small reason for his murders, but he obviously enjoyed them.) In the end, Tom is sorry for his life of crime. The sharp contrast with Rico is evident in Powers’s dying words: “I ain’t so tough.” Just so. That is why we like him so much better than Rico. Unlike Little Caesar, Tom Powers is not the completely ruthless reflection of the acquisitive businessman stereotype. The moviegoer was able to take vicarious enjoyment when someone like Powers, with his ultimate sense of justice, “stuck it to” a society that had seemingly become so unjust.

Gangsterism in the early thirties was not, of course, a phenomenon confined to the silver screen. Popular attitudes toward real criminals paralleled the feelings evoked by movie mobsters. Even if they would not admit it, many people identified up to a point with the real gangsters they read about in the newspapers. It was not, however, brutality and selfishness that the public was approving. The popular mood found it agreeable to romanticize the criminals, to see them as social bandits who robbed bankers and gave to the poor. Seeing Depression criminals as Robin Hoods was best exemplified in Woody Guthrie’s 1939 song “The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd.” Guthrie’s mythicized Floyd had been unjustly accused of crime and had gone on to become a folk hero:

*There’s many a starving farmer the same  
old story told  
How the outlaw paid their mortgage and  
saved their little home.*

Guthrie’s closing verses made the point that many others left unarticulated in their romanticizing of criminals:

*Yes, as through this world I ramble,*

*I see lots of funny men,  
Some will rob you with a 6-gun, and  
some will rob you with a pen.  
But as through your life you'll travel,  
wherever you may roam,  
You won't never see an outlaw drive  
a family from their home.*

In point of fact, few Robin Hoods were roaming the American countryside in the Depression. Floyd, "Baby Face" Nelson, John Dillinger, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, and the rest were cold-blooded murderers, largely devoid of the human sympathies some observers like to find in them. It must be realized, though, that people who identified with them were making them over in the social bandit image. Their minds created what they wanted to see and then admired it. The songs about the bandits survived, as Eric Hobsbawm has noted that they traditionally did with social bandits in peasant societies. Those songs allowed people to maintain the myths and "the vision of the just society."

Movies could also deal with issues similar to the Guthrie version of how Pretty Boy Floyd became an outlaw because he was wrongly accused. *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932) is one of the most powerful films of the period. The hero of this Mervyn Le Roy movie, James Allen (Paul Muni), returns from the World War determined to find a better life than his old job as a shipping clerk in a shoe factory. He does not want a job like his life in the Army, being under orders, working in routines. Rather, Jim wants "a man's job"—an expression frequently used to convey the idea of self-respect and independence: "I've learned that life is more important than a stupid, insignificant job." Jim takes to the road seeking an engineering position, but is able to find only occasional employment. Finally he becomes desperate and tries to hock his war medal, but finds a case in the pawnshop is already filled with them.

Jim meets Pete, another "bum," who tells him he knows where they can get some free hamburgers. Jim's real troubles begin when Pete unexpectedly pulls a gun on the diner's proprietor and forces Jim to join in a robbery. Showing no concern for the circumstances, a judge sentences Jim to ten years at hard labor. The action takes place in an unspecified southern state (although scarcely anyone has an accent), and Jim finds himself on a chain gang. On the surface, *I Am a Fugitive* is an effective attack on the horrors of chain gangs. On a slightly deeper level, it carried a more important meaning to Depression audiences. The prison becomes an exaggerated vision of society. Innocent people are treated brutally. The regimented life from which Jim wanted to escape in the Army and factory is even worse in prison. "You

even have to get their permission before you can sweat," another inmate tells Jim. While those in power are cruel and unreasoning, the victims show concern for each other and cooperate as much as they can. An older man, Bomber, advises Jim on how to escape and gives him \$7, which it took him years to accumulate. Sebastian, a black prisoner, helps Jim bend his shackles. Muni himself presents a more sympathetic character than he had a few months earlier in his more noted role as the Capone-like leading man in *Scarface* (1932).

After his escape Jim (now calling himself Allen James) becomes a 1920s success story, rising Alger-style in a Chicago engineering firm. His only mistake is to fall into the clutches of a "loose woman" who finds out about his past and threatens to expose him unless he marries her, which he does. Finally, after he asks for a divorce, she turns him in. Because Allen has become such a pillar of the community, all of Chicago comes to his defense and the governor refuses to allow extradition. Then an official of the southern state arrives and promises Jim a full pardon if he will voluntarily return and serve ninety days of easy time.

The state goes back on its promise and Jim is outraged: "The state's promise didn't mean anything! It was all lies! . . . Their crimes are worse than mine, worse than anybody's here. They're the ones who belong in chains, not me!" Jim finally escapes again. Now he symbolizes all Depression victims, desperately searching for any kind of work, a social outcast. He constantly feels hunted, and when he returns to Chicago to see the woman with whom he had fallen in love earlier, Jim hears a noise and, believing the authorities are after him, takes his leave. As his face fades, the woman asks, "How do you live?" From the dark comes a hoarse whisper: "I steal!" And the movie ends. No other thirties movie has an ending so cold and depressing. *I Am a Fugitive* was the perfect expression of the national mood in 1932: despair, suffering, hopelessness. Few movies have ever represented a year so well. Le Roy's film was 1932: hopelessness. America had hit bottom.<sup>4</sup>

The change that the New Deal brought in the nation's mood, its restoration of hope, was clearly paralleled in Hollywood's productions. If the Hoover years had been reflected in the horror and gangster films, in 1932's *I Am a Fugitive* and Tod Browning's *Freaks*, the spirit of the early New Deal was evident in the new popular movies of 1933. It was *the* year of the musical.

In *Gold Diggers of 1933*, the Depression hits show business. As a rehearsal is going on, with the cast singing "We're in the Money," a sheriff comes in to close down the show. The film's story is of the planning and production of a new show, a musical about the Depression. It seems that hard times might be overcome by singing about them. Brad (Dick Powell), the man who supplies the money for the show, turns out to be a member of a wealthy banking

family that disapproves of popular music and show people. The film does not indict the rich as a class; rather, it says that their values are wrong. The upper social classes are portrayed as prejudiced, foolish, and believing that money can solve all problems: "Everyone has a price." The story is extremely contrived. Brad's nasty rich brother softens and three aristocrats wind up marrying show girls and, we assume, living happily ever after. The movie concludes with a remarkable attempt by extravagant choreographer Busby Berkeley to make a social statement. As marching World War I soldiers are converted into jobless men "marching" on a soupline, Joan Blondell sings:

*Remember my forgotten man,  
You put a rifle in his hand,  
You sent him far away,  
You shouted, "Hip Hooray!"  
But look at him today.*

If the connection with the New Deal and its restoration of hope were not entirely explicit in *Gold Diggers*, it hit people over the head in another 1933 musical. In *Footlight Parade*, Jimmy Cagney plays a Broadway producer who, as he puts it in song, hears the breadline calling. The salvation from that breadline is made clear in the movie's closing number. Cagney and Ruby Keeler hold up cards showing first the NRA's Blue Eagle, then the warm "nothing to fear" smile of FDR. The other enormously successful Warner Brothers musical of 1933, *42nd Street* (which was chronologically the first of the three), is less precise in its reference to Roosevelt, but shows the almost magical hopes of 1933: Chorus girl Ruby Keeler miraculously learns the leading role in the fictional show *Pretty Lady* in only five hours after the star breaks her leg. Ruby is, of course, a huge success and shuffles off to Buffalo as a new star. The mood here is a far cry from *I Am a Fugitive*, a year before. This sort of optimistic nonsense could not have been sold to audiences in 1932. After the New Deal restored hope, *42nd Street* became the third largest money-maker of 1933.

It is undeniable that the backstage musicals of the New Deal's first year served principally as a means of escape from the worries of hard times. Cultural historian Richard Pells has noted that Busby Berkeley's colossal dance numbers seem like "monuments to collectivism—with their hundreds of anonymous boys and girls, their utilization of massive choruses and gigantic orchestras, rather than soloists and small combos, their faultlessly mechanical precision. . . ." Yet it seems unlikely that many moviegoers carried this message away from his productions, even subconsciously. Instead, the musicals lifted spirits and held out hope for better times. In this regard, they repre-

sented Roosevelt's first year almost as effectively as *Fugitive* did Hoover's last year.

Another film reflection of the new optimism of the Hundred Days was far more ironic. Walt Disney was an arch-conservative. His enormously popular 1933 cartoon *Three Little Pigs* was probably intended to be a call for a return to the virtues of Horatio Alger and Calvin Coolidge. But when it was released two months after Roosevelt's inauguration, *Three Little Pigs* seemed to fit in perfectly with the rising optimism of the New Deal. Particularly appropriate to the new President's theme of overcoming fear of the Depression was the cartoon's song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" People who suddenly believed that they could defeat the wolf made the song a big hit.<sup>5</sup>

The thoughtless optimism of the musicals and Disney's pigs made the movies of 1933 distinctive. The feelings of optimism trailed off in succeeding years, but faith in Roosevelt remained high. Films in the mid- and later thirties moved more deeply into social problems and the values of Depression America. Several modern critics have argued that Hollywood became in those years the guardian of traditional American values. Most such assessments are made in a tone of disdain. This is based on a misconception of "traditional American culture." There was not, as I have said earlier, a traditional American culture, but a variety of values that often contradicted one another. The values that dominated movies in the New Deal years were *not* those of acquisitive individualism.

Hollywood's view of government changed drastically after the New Deal commenced. Whereas government had appeared in early gangster films as inept and, on the state level in *I Am a Fugitive*, as oppressive and evil, the post-1933 film vision of the federal government became extremely favorable. The Feds were now righteous and benevolent. Lawmen had never been the heroes in the movies of the Hoover years. But by the mid-thirties, the very stars who had been criminals a few years before jumped over to the "right side of the law." Edward G. Robinson was transformed from the grasping Little Caesar into a double-agent cop who destroys the gang he joins in *Bullets or Ballots* (1936). In *G-Men* (1935), erstwhile public enemy James Cagney becomes an FBI hero. And Humphrey Bogart, while still frequently playing the bad guy in later thirties movies, popped up in *Crime School* (1938) as a reforming deputy commissioner of corrections.

But if the early Depression view of government had undergone a metamorphosis, the same could not be said of the film portrayals of businessmen, greed, and the rich. If anything, the Hollywood vision of these people and attitudes became more unfavorable. The association of such portrayals with the New Deal was clear. Sometimes it was explicit. In *The President Vanishes* (1934), a president who begins his radio speeches with the familiar, "My

Friends . . . ,” declares that “our struggle is against the forces of selfishness and greed.” The 1935 MGM production of *A Tale of Two Cities* is true to Dickens in showing Sidney Carton’s ultimate selfless sacrifice; it is also chock-full of statements showing the inhumanity and selfishness of the rich and of businessmen, for example: “I am a businessman, think of me as a machine”; “There is no room for sentiment in business”; “There is a sickness today that is called humanitarianism”; “Hunger is an indulgence with these peasants, as the gout is with us”; “What I get from these peasants is barely enough to pay my perfume bill.”

The ultimate in the depiction of the values of the Depression is approached in Howard Hawks’s morality play *Barbary Coast* (1935). It is not a great film, but it is a crystal-clear rendering of the values of the thirties. Edward G. Robinson as Louis Chamalis is evil incarnate, a mid-nineteenth-century San Francisco version of Rico. As his men are about to wreck the presses of a newspaperman who wants to expose him, Chamalis says: “This is business.” When asked why he killed a man, Louis matter-of-factly replies, “for business reasons.” On the opposite side is Joel McCrea as James Carmichael, a lover of poetry and people, representing good. Robinson and McCrea contend over the heart of Mary Rutledge (Miriam Hopkins), who represents society, as women so often do. She arrives in San Francisco motivated by greed and is taken in by Chamalis to run a rigged roulette wheel in his gambling house. He calls her “Swan,” and as such she is greedy. But, predictably, Hopkins has become good Mary again by the last reel. In a completely selfless act, she offers to stay with Louis if he will let Carmichael, whom she now loves, go. Even Robinson has been at least partially won over to the good values, however, and as he is taken into custody by vigilantes, he tells her to go ahead with McCrea.

*Dead End* (1937) was one of the more extraordinary productions of the decade. It starkly portrays the life of the urban slum dweller and the contrasts between rich and poor. Two kids who grew up together on the Lower East Side have taken different paths. “Babyface” Martin (Humphrey Bogart) grew up to big-time crime. He has killed eight men. Dave Connell (Joel McCrea) went to college for six years and became an architect, but is unable to find a job. When Babyface returns to the neighborhood and learns of Dave’s situation, he says he’s glad he “ain’t a sap” like him. Babyface is the embodiment of the primitive egoistical business ethic that dominated the 1920s. He tries to teach the local kids how to fight dirty against rival gangs. When the kids say that would not be fair, Babyface is incredulous: “Fair! What’s fair? When you fight, you fight to win; and it don’t matter how.” Clearly, *Dead End*, like so many other thirties movies, was reinforcing viewers’ opposition to self-centeredness.

But there is more to *Dead End* than most films with a similar message.

Unlike such earlier productions as *Public Enemy*, for instance, it squarely places on society the responsibility for people “going wrong.” Dave complains that people like Babyface, who were once good kids, are labeled “enemies of society.” “Well, what do they have to be friendly about?” he asks. After Dave winds up in a fight with Babyface and shoots him, a policeman informs Dave that he will get a large reward. “You mean they’ll pay me for it?” he says in a tone of disgust, indicating that society was responsible for making Martin a criminal and now is willing to pay to eliminate him. As an architect, Dave Connell has an answer: build a new society, eliminate the slums and the social conditions that breed crime and make good kids go bad. McCrea was a drastically different leading man from Robinson’s Rico. The New Deal–style social consciousness of *Dead End* was evident in many thirties movies: *The Great O’Malley* (1937), *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938), and the aforementioned *Crime School* (1938), to name a few.<sup>6</sup>

Two Depression-decade directors stand out as the leading examples of those who glorified the traditional, moral American values and condemned the amoral spirit of the marketplace. Since their films have attracted so much attention and are often used by those who charge that American movies in the New Deal years were performing the conservative function of reestablishing the myths of American individualism, it is instructive to analyze the works of Frank Capra and John Ford.

Early in the thirties, Frank Capra achieved great success with comedies in the “screwball” genre. The most notable of these was *It Happened One Night* (1934), which remains the only film ever to win all the major Academy Awards. Andrew Bergman notes in his history of thirties films that the “whackiness” in such films “cemented social classes.” Screwball comedy, he says, “was implosive; it worked to pull things together.” Up to a point, he is right. In *It Happened One Night*, a down-and-out newspaper reporter (Clark Gable) meets a runaway heiress (Claudette Colbert). Initially separated by their vastly different class backgrounds, the two go through a series of whacky episodes together and fall in love. In the end, her father advises her to forget her planned marriage to another rich man and go off with Gable. Surely there was nothing “class conscious” about such films. To dwell on this obvious fact, however, is to miss the point. Few would make the preposterous argument that rich people are inherently evil. What is far more important than social background is the set of values a person embraces. Most screwball comedies ridiculed not the rich *per se*, but their *values*. And they were often quite effective. The “implosion” that typically took place at the end of such movies consisted of the rich man abandoning his wicked, selfish ways and adopting the values of the “ordinary” people.

Yet there is a critical difference between Capra’s films in the first half of the

decade—the true screwball comedies—and his later movies. *It Happened One Night*, like *Lady for a Day* (1933), depicts kindhearted people of wealth and power making possible fantastic endings. Capra soon altered his course, claiming that a man who visited him criticized him for not making movies that would serve “God’s and humanity’s purposes.” For the rest of the Depression, Frank Capra tried to meet this challenge. The point of such productions as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) was plain. The rich are powerful, as they were in the earlier movies, but they are no longer screwy, kind, and wonderful. On the contrary, they are the forces of evil, standing in the way of the people and their will. Some among the wealthy might be salvaged, but most were likely to remain opposed to the common people and common decency. There were still cases of the rich being good in the end, but now they began as ruthless, grasping plutocrats who had to be reformed—as in the case of Mr. Kirby (Edward Arnold) in *You Can’t Take It With You* (1938). And it happens only because he abandons his old, self-centered values and adopts those of cooperation.

Capra equated traditional, rural American culture with goodness. The moral, naive common man—Gary Cooper as Mr. Deeds or James Stewart as Mr. Smith—is the hero, and the cynical, greedy urban businessman is the villain. But it was not quite as simple as it seemed. Capra did not contend that the “masses” or the “ordinary” people were automatically right. On the contrary, especially in *Mr. Smith*, it is clear that the common people can be misled by the forces of evil. While Capra generally indicated that good would prevail, there was nothing certain about it. In fact, the famous climax of *Mr. Smith* is ambiguous, but perhaps a bit more believable than the conversion of the plutocrat in *You Can’t Take It With You*. The convert to what is right in *Mr. Smith* is the corrupt Senator Paine (Claude Rains), not the truly sinister businessman, Jim Taylor (again Edward Arnold). Perhaps Taylor would have converted, too, after the film ended, but that seems unlikely. Rather, the messages *Mr. Smith* left with viewers were that good *could* triumph, but there was no certainty of it; that evil businessmen were still at large, and that if people wanted to achieve a more democratic society, they would have to continue to struggle toward that end.

This was powerful stuff. Few people are unmoved by Senator Smith’s comy call for “plain, ordinary, everyday kindness, a little looking out for the other fella, loving thy neighbor.” Sentimental, to be sure, but *not* conservative. Anyone who has seen the affirmative reaction of an audience of college students in the 1980s to the climax of *Mr. Smith* cannot doubt the effect on Depression-era moviegoers. The response of modern students is an indication of the existence of a reservoir of humanitarianism below the surface of our culture, even in the cynical age of “looking out for number one.” That underground spring was bubbling at the surface during the Depression. Capra’s films were a reflection of it, not its cause.

Frank Capra was one of the few leading directors of the later Depression who dealt with contemporary subjects. He reached into the revered past for the names—and characters—of his heroes (Longfellow Deeds, Jefferson Smith); the action, though, was in the present. John Ford, on the other hand, frequently set his stories in the American past.

Ford’s liking for the American past and its mythical values is evident in *Stagecoach* (1939), a western that clearly reflected the values of the Depression. The characters aboard the stagecoach appear to be evil—an alcoholic physician, a gambler, a prostitute, an outlaw—but they all prove to be just, humane, compassionate people. The one character who is not a basically fair and benevolent person is, significantly, a selfish banker. Ellsworth Henry Gatewood, the banker, sounds like a spokesman for the Liberty League or the Republican party of the thirties. “And remember this: What’s good for the banks is good for the country!” Gatewood exclaims as he steals \$50,000 from his own bank. “America for Americans! . . . Reduce taxes! The national debt is shocking!” the crooked banker declares in additional obvious references to the 1930s rather than the late nineteenth century in which the film is set. “What this country needs is a businessman for president!” Gatewood concludes. All of this is in sharp contrast to the values of the prostitute, Dallas (Claire Trevor); the outlaw, Ringo Kid (John Wayne); and Hickok, the whiskey salesman, who speaks of the need to practice “Christian charity, one for the other.” In the end, Ringo and Dallas are “saved from the blessings of civilization.”

In 1940, Ford addressed contemporary social problems directly by bringing John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* to the screen. Although of course not as comprehensive or powerful as the novel, the movie does a remarkable job in presenting the moral economic values of the era. The values of compassion and sharing are evident repeatedly, as in the incident at the truckstop where the proprietor, waitress, and truck drivers all sacrifice to help the hungry Joad family—without letting the Joads know they are helping them. Tom Joad’s statement before he takes leave of his mother sounds almost like a verse from the Earl Robinson–Alfred Hayes ballad “Joe Hill.” “Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one—an’ then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be everywhere—wherever you look,” Tom tells Ma. “Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. . . .” The evils of egoism and the benefits of cooperation are repeatedly emphasized.

The final “social” film of the Depression was Ford’s *How Green Was My Valley*, which won the Academy Award as best picture in 1941. The adaptation of Richard Llewellyn’s novel is a beautiful and stirring document of working-class culture. The differences between the values of the Welsh coal miners and their employers are made plain. Mr. Morgan remarks that the

mine owners will not take advantage of a surplus of workers to cut wages "because the owners are not savages. They are men, too, like us." One of his sons responds: "Men, yes, but not like us. . . . They have power and we have none." The answer, he says, is "a union of all men." At another point in the film, Ianto denounces clergymen: "You make yourselves out to be shepherds of the flock and yet you allow your sheep to live in filth and poverty. And if they at times raise their voices against it, you calm them by telling them their suffering is the will of God. . . . Are we sheep to be herded and sheared by a handful of owners?"

Different messages might be carried away from such films, but they plainly were rejecting the ethic of acquisitive individualism. In both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *How Green Was My Valley*, Ford was quite openly pleading for a society based more on cooperation. Yet some recent social critics have contended that Ford, as one of them (Richard Pells) puts it, "turned out to be the most conservative" director in the Depression era. Similar complaints have been raised about Frank Capra, of whom Pells says, "His was a faith more suited to the individualism of the nineteenth century than to the collectivist dreams of the 1930's." Such assessments are, I think, based upon two fundamental errors: the assumption that new is automatically better than old, and a misunderstanding of at least one meaning of "conservatism."

The former fallacy is an ironic one for a critic of American society to fall into. Scarcely anything, after all, is more American than the equations new = good and old = bad. The popularity of *The Grapes of Wrath* in both its forms, Professor Pells says with more than a little sadness, showed that among the American people there was "some deep yearning for the world as it had been rather than as it might become." This misses the most crucial point. The yearning for the world as it had been—or as people liked to believe it had been—was the expression of hope for what it might become. Radical, revolutionary, and reform movements have often been based upon a myth of a "golden age" in the past. When in *How Green Was My Valley* Huw says: "It makes me think of so much that was good, and is gone," the viewer is likely to feel sadness, but the film also builds up anger that the good life of yesterday has been destroyed. The result can be an increased desire to change things. In such ways, the myths of the past become the agenda for the future. This is to say that it was precisely because the myths about American culture were myths that they served a progressive rather than a reactionary function. People looked backward to see in front of them.

The longing for an imagined golden age, for a feeling of security, for an identity, was evident in the thirties quest for a sense of place. As Professor Michael Steiner has pointed out, four of the five top-selling novels of the Depression decade—*Gone With the Wind* (1936), *God's Little Acre* (1933), *The Good Earth* (1931), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—dealt with the

search for security in history or on the land. (The fifth book, Dale Carnegie's 1937 volume *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, certainly goes against the grain of the analysis offered here, and this may be a useful place to remind the reader that no claim is being made that *everyone* abandoned the mores of acquisitive individualism during the Depression. "Success" and "self-help" books were plentiful during the Depression, and 750,000 copies of Carnegie's volume were sold in its first year.) The past, like the ownership of a piece of land, offered a refuge for people distressed with the present and fearful of the future. A "sense of continuity with generations gone before," John Dos Passos wrote in 1941, "can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present."

At first blush, films that provided such a sense of continuity certainly appear to have been performing a conservative function. But they were not. Robert Sklar hinted at the reason when he wrote that the young film producers of the thirties were "more deeply entwined with the values not of the American marketplace, but of traditional American culture." The values that filmmakers emphasized were those of an older America, of returning to the cooperative portion of the paradoxical mixture of values in the American culture. Surely there was little in the films of the Depression (except, of course, in *Our Daily Bread*) that pushed collectivism. But there are, fortunately, more than the two options of "rugged individualism" or collectivism. What was evident in the films of Capra and Ford, as well as in many other Depression-era movies, was a call for a kind of cooperative individualism that recognized individuals could achieve a degree of independence and self-respect only by cooperating. "The 1930's," as historian Warren Susman has rightly said, "was *the* decade of participation and belonging." There was a realization that "sticking together" was the way for ordinary people to keep from being oppressed. This was certainly very different from the Herbert Spencer–Ayn Rand sort of individualism, but it was the only way for most people to achieve meaningful independence. Through cooperation, working people did not become totally "free." Rather, they became interdependent. Such a state restored one's dignity and differed fundamentally from dependence upon people who were in a position to dominate. The last word on the Depression's emphasis on cooperative individualism may have been a remark made by Danny Jordan (George Brent) at the end of *Racket Busters*, a less than outstanding 1938 film: "You know, Nora, I've learned one thing from Pops in all this business: People like us, in order to make it, we gotta stick together."<sup>7</sup>

Evidence of many different types points to the conclusion that Americans during the Depression were returning to a set of values at variance with those of amoral individualism and the marketplace. But this shift was not evenly distributed across the American population. The working class appears to

have been most imbued with cooperative values, but they also were clearly spreading along with the economic distress among the middle class. Most of the well-to-do, however, appear to have continued their adherence to the amoral marketplace.

On one ethical issue after another, national polls in the thirties indicated that workers favored compassionate government policies. To cite but two examples: In 1935, 89 percent of the poor in a *Fortune* poll said they believed "the government should see to it that every man who wants to work has a job." A plurality of the prosperous in the same survey rejected the idea. In 1936, 74 percent of the people polled in another national survey for *Fortune* favored free, government-supported medical and dental care for those unable to pay.

Such national findings were dramatically confirmed in local in-depth studies of attitudes. For example, a 1936 survey of the attitudes of 600 Chicago residents found a marked "tendency for the middle income group to agree with the lower group on questions pertaining to the present distribution of wealth and influence," a *Public Opinion* article reported. Two of the questions represent the trend. To the inquiry, "Are the things that wealthy businessmen want the government to do usually best for the country as a whole?" 80 percent of the wealthy responded yes; only 20 percent of the lower income group and 23 percent of the middle-income group answered that way. When the 1936 Chicago sample was asked, "Do businessmen and people of wealth have too much influence in running the affairs of the nation?" 80 percent of the lower- and 69 percent of the middle-income people said yes; only 7 percent of the wealthy agreed.

The Chicago study, along with a similar one in Akron in 1938–39 that I discuss in Chapter 13, and evidence from national polls and letters, shows that during the 1930s the values of moral economics were moving up the status ladder (or, perhaps more accurately, many members of the middle class were slipping down that ladder and coming to see their interests as being similar to those of laborers). As one of Mr. Roosevelt's correspondents put it in a 1936 letter, "If you will insist on a tax program that will actually redistribute the enormous and ill-gotten fortunes of this country, the plain people and the middle classes will certainly be with you." The values of moral economics seem to have emerged among a majority of Americans only when distress touched a sufficiently large number of people that it could no longer be ignored. In the apt metaphor used by columnist Ellen Goodman, suffering had reached a "critical mass."<sup>8</sup>

None of this is meant to suggest in any simplistic way that workers were "good guys" with only altruistic impulses and owners were greedy, evil people. Undoubtedly, many workers accepted the amoral values of classical political economy; certainly many of them had in the 1920s. It is equally certain

that some in the owning class favored an economy in which morality played a larger role. The points are that the interests of the two classes were divergent and the Depression made the interests of working-class Americans more apparent to them and led many in the middle class to identify with those below them. We are speaking, in any case, of tendencies, not absolute groupings, and the tendency of the lower and middle classes toward a value system different from acquisitive individualism is clear.

Most working- and middle-class Americans in the Depression were not socialists in any strict ideological sense, but certainly they were leaning to the left. All this talk about morality, fairness, equality, humanitarianism, compassion, and moral economics is, admittedly, rather amorphous; but that is how it is with popular values. They do not constitute a coherent ideology. Ideology among those who are not professional intellectuals is like vermouth in a good martini. A hint of it is essential, but too much will spoil the result.

Americans in the 1930s may not have known much about ideology, but they knew what they liked—and what they did *not* like. Their rejection of greed, egoism, and the unfettered marketplace led them toward values through which they could "remoralize" the American economy and society.