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The Depression and the Early 1940s

The Context

From the Civil War through the 1920s, there was a great deal of poverty in the United States. Decades of protest, political agitation, and unionization efforts were not successful in altering basic economic conditions and the near-revolutionary agitation of the years between 1916 and 1919 ended in total loss for reformers, unionists, socialists, and other dissidents. The prosperity of the 1920s helped some people in some regions and economic sectors of the country. But all ships were not raised on the tide of prosperity; some economic sectors, including the large agricultural sector, continued to suffer.

The long-term problems of farmers were exacerbated during the 1930s by severe drops in the price of farm products and drops in consumer demand. Farming became an even more tenuous occupation than it had been, farm profits thinner, farm families less stable. Parts of the country were also struck by a multiyear drought. The hardest hit was the so-called Dust Bowl, a large area that included western Kansas, the southern edge of Nebraska, southeastern Colorado, the northwestern corner of Oklahoma, northwestern Texas, and the northeastern edge of New Mexico. Wind storms across the Dust Bowl carried away topsoil made vulnerable to erosion by poor farming practices, crops failed year after year, great numbers of farms went into foreclosure, and local economies were devastated.

Popular representations of 1930s farmland conditions sometimes make it seem that all except very wealthy farmers failed and left the land. In actuality, according to the occupational summaries of the 1930 and 1940 Censuses, the numbers of farmers and tenant farmers grew during the decade, from 5.0 million in 1930 to 5.1 million in 1940. The number of farm laborers, people who worked for wages on farms, however, declined from 4.4 to 3.0 million.

Of the 1930 American workforce of 49 million people, 21 percent worked in farming and 29 percent worked in one of the manufacturing/mechanical industries. As used by the Census, manufacturing/mechanical was a catch-all category. The majority in it were skilled craft workers, apprentices, engineers, builders, contractors, manufacturers, foremen, managers, and the like. Some 6.5 million people in the category – about 13 percent of the total workforce – were unskilled factory "operatives" and laborers; about half of those 6.5 million worked in the steel, auto, cotton, and clothing industries or as miners. Along with farm laborers, those unskilled operatives and laborers – together, these groups comprised one-fifth of the workforce – became the focus of government attention, renewed unionization drives, and later visual and written representations of the Great Depression.

Official government figures put unemployment at 25 percent in 1933, 21.7 percent in 1934, 20.1 percent in 1935, 16.9 percent in 1936, 14.3 percent in 1937, 19.0 percent in 1938, and 10 percent in 1941. The miseries triggered by unemployment – homelessness, hunger, broken families, forced migrations, and psychological traumas – were far worse and of far longer duration than the country experienced in any prior depression.

The Hoover Administration, which assumed office in early 1928, took the position that the Depression triggered by the stock market crash of October 1929 would end as soon as the "business cycle" went through a period of "self-correction." In the mounting strikes and protests of 1930 and 1931, the Administration did little to discourage businesspeople and their allies from responding with the same repressive measures that had been used for decades. In 1932, its responses to two large protests came to symbolize its attitudes. The

first protest was the "Hunger March" at the Ford Motor Works in Dearborn, Michigan, protesting the layoffs of some 60,000 workers. That protest ended with police and Ford guards using tear gas and then shooting into crowds, killing four and wounding several dozen. The second protest was a march on Washington, DC, by World War I veterans demanding that the pensions they had been promised for their service be paid not in 1945, as scheduled, but immediately. Around 20,000 veterans and family members encamped in the city and, after several weeks, were finally evicted by the US Army, which used tanks, infantry formations, and tear gas to do the job.

Throughout the 1920s, American unions had great difficulties negotiating contracts and organizing new workers. After the stock market crash of 1929, those difficulties continued. During the Hoover years, there were renewed efforts to bring about unionization and equally forceful efforts by businesspeople to resist unionization which, from their perspectives, represented a fundamental challenge to private property rights and social order.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933 with altogether different beliefs than President Hoover about how to end the Depression. Roosevelt and the new Democratic-controlled Congress believed that the Federal government needed to take an active, aggressive role and intercede in the market-driven economy, including the labor market; that it needed to take a major role in planning for economic development; and that it needed to serve as an employer of last resort, putting people to work on publicly funded projects. In Roosevelt's first term, Congress passed major pieces of legislation – a "New Deal" for Americans – that put those beliefs into action. The government entered the marketplace as regulator and arbitrator through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and the National Recovery Administration. It took its first steps toward endorsing the orderly development of labor unions in Section 7a of the National Recovery Act, which gave workers in some industries the right to organize unions while prohibiting coercion by employers. It took on a central planning role through the Tennessee Valley Authority, a government-owned corporation that was responsible for the

redevelopment of the Tennessee Valley watershed that spanned seven southern states. It became the employer of last resort through the Civilian Conservation Corp and the Civil Works Administration. In 1935, Congress passed the Social Security Act, and the Works Project Administration (WPA), another government public works program that in later years employed numbers of artists and writers, was established. Also passed in 1935, the Wagner Act mandated that workers be free to select their own union; legalized striking, picketing, and boycotting; prohibited employer practices like blacklisting; established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to oversee the election of a union as an exclusive bargaining agent; and mandated that managements bargain in good faith with NLRB-certified unions. The Wagner Act put the Federal government squarely on the side of labor unions. New Deal legislation continued to be passed during Roosevelt's second term. In 1938, the Fair Standards Labor Act was passed. That legislation prohibited child labor, established a minimum wage, and established a 40-hour standard work week.

The cascade of early New Deal reforms did not immediately end the Depression. Continuing widespread misery was summarized in 1936 by President Roosevelt in the "Inaugural Address" that began his second term, when he spoke of the millions of people living "under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago," the millions "denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children," and concluded that he saw "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."

The Wagner Act led to major drives by the new Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) to unionize unskilled workers and others in the mass production industries. In late 1936 and early 1937, the CIO chose as its main target the largest American corporation, the auto manufacturer General Motors, reasoning that if it could unionize GM, other corporations would see that resistance was futile and would negotiate contracts. "Sitdown" strikes were used against GM. These involved workers taking control of the factories in which they worked by sitting down on the factory floor close to

the machinery and refusing to leave until a contract was negotiated. The tactic was dramatic and new (though it had actually been used earlier in other strikes). Because the machinery could be damaged, the strikers were not exposed to attacks by company police, local police, and state militias.

GM's flagship production center in Flint, Michigan, was the central site for the sitdown strikers. Helped by the labor-friendly Roosevelt Administration and by the recently elected labor-friendly Governor of Michigan, Frank Murphy, the union won the Flint strike when GM agreed to recognize it and to negotiate a contract that would cover all auto workers at its plants. GM's capitulation demonstrated that the CIO had power and important allies. Most important, it led to successful union drives in other mass production industries and to a belief within the union movement that destiny was on its side and that more than one hundred years of resistance by American corporations to negotiating contracts with their workforces had come to an end.

The Hoover Administration had a "hands-off" approach to ending the Depression, while the Roosevelt Administration hoped to end it through basic reforms and employment programs. A number of other political parties and reform movements, both radical and conservative, were established or came into new prominence during the Great Depression. Most had little impact. A group called End Poverty in California, founded by the writer Upton Sinclair, came closest to actually gaining power when Sinclair won the Democratic primary for Governor in 1934 and seemed headed for victory until the leaders of the California Republican and Democratic Parties joined together to engineer his narrow defeat in what was called at the time "the campaign of the century." The group that had by far the deepest and most lasting impact was the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). Formed in 1919, the CPUSA had been small and largely ineffectual during the 1920s. But almost immediately after the stock market crash, because of its leadership in some strikes and protests, it began to make gains. By the time Roosevelt took office in 1933, it had a considerable presence in New York City and a few other places.

The CPUSA's impact was not to be measured in terms of how it did in elections, for it never attracted more than a microscopic number of voters. Rather, its impact was felt in other ways. First, of course, the CPUSA was the cause of anti-Communism, a transcending political and social movement, far more important than the CPUSA itself, which over its long history from the 1930s into the 1980s fundamentally shaped American domestic politics and foreign policy. Second, but most important for this and the next chapter, in its Great Depression heyday the CPUSA attracted a significant number of writers to its cause and thereby had a major impact on American literature. That impact included the production by writers of CPUSA literary works. It also led to the later targeting of writers as subversives by anti-Communists and was a cause of the depoliticization of American literature after 1950.

More so than other political parties, the CPUSA sometimes dramatically changed its positions. During the 1930s, the party's most notable shifts involved such questions as whether or not to cooperate with liberals and others, whether to damn or to enthusiastically support the New Deal, and whether significant change was destined to occur through revolution or through evolution. A person could be attracted to the Party in, say, 1930 by its positions on certain issues and discover a few years later that those positions were now deemed, in the party's standard language, "incorrect" and had been superseded by "correct" ones. Many such changes were mandated by the Communist International in the Soviet Union, a fact which, its opponents said, showed that American Communists were puppets who danced at the will of their Soviet puppeteers. The claim that Communists were puppets or agents of the Soviets, and that the Soviets were conspiring to subvert and destroy the US, would later develop into the foremost principle of anti-Communism.

Given its shifting stances, what did the CPUSA believe? In 1936, near the apex of its popularity, the party published a book titled *What Is Communism?*, written by Earl Browder. Browder held the top position of Secretary of the Party and was its presidential candidate; the book, an extended campaign guide and manifesto, stressed the following positions:

- The Soviet Union was the beacon of hope for humankind. In the less than 20 years after the Bolshevik Revolution, it had made astounding progress: "The revolution transformed the degraded masses into the rulers of the country. It raised their standards of living and created a new and wonderful life. In the Soviet Union a new kind of human being was being created, and there they are actually realizing the dream of all the best minds of history – socialism. … The victory of socialism in the Soviet Union is the fruit of the genius of Stalin, who led the Communist Party and all Soviet toilers to their great triumph."[1]
- The Party promised that it would support progressive unions, social movements, and legislation that would enable the masses to survive the crisis of the Depression. The Depression, however, was in actuality the beginning of the end of capitalism, not a short-term crisis.
- Declaring that the US had been founded through revolution, the Party claimed that the "Declaration of Independence was for that time what the Communist Manifesto is for ours."[2]It said, "We Communists claim the revolutionary traditions of Americanism. We are the only ones who consciously continue those traditions and apply them to the problems of today. *We are the Americans and Communism is the Americanism of the twentieth century*" (italics in original).[3] At many of its large meetings, the speakers' platform was decked with American flags and "Yankee Doodle" was played. Abraham Lincoln was often invoked as a great inspiration.
- It argued that black Americans were "doubly oppressed," by race as well as by social class. It promised that it would work hard and tirelessly for the economic, political, and social equality of black Americans. The treatment of minorities in the Soviet Union would be emulated, for "the Soviet Union today is composed of 100 different nations and national

[1] Earl Browder, *What Is Communism?* (Vanguard Press, New York, 1936), pp. 213–14.

[2] *What Is Communism?* p. 16.

[3] p. 19

minorities. They live in harmony, and mutually aid each other's development."[4]

- It argued that "The fascist drive toward a second world war is gaining momentum"[5]: Italy had invaded Ethiopia, the Japanese imperialists had seized Manchuria and North China, and Japan and Germany would soon attack the Soviet Union. It promised that it would press the American government to counter the fascist threat, to end its policy of isolating the country from the rest of the world. It said it would petition Congress and the President "for the embargo of trade and loans against Italy and all other fascist aggressors,"[6] that it would organize mass meetings to protest fascist aggression, and that it would organize workers to take mass action against the aggressors.
- The US would become an altogether different country once Communism had triumphed. The government of "Soviet America," under the full control of the people, would immediately "take over and operate the banks, railroads, water and air transport, mines and all major trustified industries [i.e., monopolies]" as well as large-scale agriculture. Minor industries would be reorganized as "functions of local government or as cooperatives, or, in some instances, as auxiliaries of minor industries." Small farmers would be organized into cooperatives. All able-bodied people would be required to work for "socially determined" wages. As a result of productivity increases, the standard of living would be raised. People would live in decent housing and eat good food and be "liberated from regimented mental slavery to Hollywood, Hearst & Co."[7] Moreover, there would be a "full unfolding of the marvelous potentialities of the human spirit, the development of human genius and individuality raised to the nth power because it is no longer the power of a few individuals but of the masses of free men and women."[8]

[4] p. 188.
[5] p. 170.
[6] p. 179.
[7] pp. 228–30.
[8] p. 231.

There were other issues discussed in *What Is Communism?*, but the ones outlined above were those which apparently captured people's imaginations. Among all the CPUSA positions, its stance on the black American cause proved especially attractive, resonating with black writers like Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. The CPUSA efforts to organize sharecropper unions in southern states, to promote interracial relationships and marriages among its members and sympathizers, and its "special" efforts in Harlem in New York City, the so-called "black capital" of the US, were followed attentively by those and other writers.

To be an actual member of the Party, as opposed to a sympathizer or occasional supporter, an individual needed to subscribe to its program, to work actively under the direction of the Party, and to pledge to follow the Party's decisions. According to *What Is Communism?*, there were 7,000 members in 1930, 9,000 in 1931, 14,000 in 1932, 18,000 in 1933, 26,000 in 1934, and 30,000 in 1935. In its May 30, 1938 cover story on Earl Browder, *Time* magazine reported that the CPUSA had 65,000 members, about 30,000 of whom were in New York City (the City had for decades been seen by many Americans as an alien place full of foreigners; its disproportionate number of CPUSA members made it seem even more alien).[9] Not only was Party membership small, but for many people, it was also very temporary. Years later, the writer Howard Fast reported in his memoir *Being Red* (1990) that William Z. Foster, Browder's predecessor and successor as General Secretary, told him that between 1920 and 1950 "more than 600,000 men and women had signed party cards and had become members of the party – most of them leaving after varying lengths of time."[10]

The CPUSA sometimes claimed that its real strength lay not just with its actual members, the people it sometimes called its "revolutionary vanguard," but with voters alienated from the Republican and Democratic parties. Presidential election results did not bear this

[9] This article is available online at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,759763,00.html

[10] Howard Fast, *Being Red* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1990), p. 354.

out. In 1932, its presidential candidate received about 103,000 votes, three-tenths of one percent of the total cast; in 1936, Browder received about 79,000 votes, two-tenths of one percent of the total; and in 1940, Browder received about 49,000, somewhat less than one-tenth of one percent of the total. Browder's name was left off some state ballots in 1940 because he was under Federal indictment for passport violations, but there was no indication during that election that he would have done any better had the indictment not existed.

Actual membership and election results aside, the CPUSA argued it had many sympathizers. In *What Is Communism?*, Browder wrote that "Membership in mass organizations of various kinds, not affiliated to the party but in general sympathy with its program on the main issues of the day, numbers about 600,000." On "special issues," he said, such as unemployment insurance and social security, five million members of various organizations were working with it. At the time, these claims were probably little more than political puffery. But in the fierce anti-Communism of later years, the claim of having so having many sympathizers and such a deep involvement with social security and unemployment insurance legislation helped to convince some that basic New Deal legislation was inspired by Communism and, also, that great numbers of Communist sympathizers existed within the Roosevelt Administration.

The Literature

In Communist theory, skillful writers could play important roles in winning over the hearts and minds of the masses to the revolutionary cause. Reports exposing the oppressions of capitalism, pamphlets, speeches, stories, poems, and plays would speak truth and inspire men and women to action. In flattering words attributed to Josef Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union from 1924 to 1953, the writer was "the engineer of the human soul." Literature had been regarded by earlier American writers such as Upton Sinclair and John Reed as a weapon of class warfare. Those earlier writers were acknowledged by the CPUSA: Reed was honored when writers' clubs that the party

sponsored were named the John Reed Clubs. But Communist writers saw their work as more deeply committed and more central to the world revolution than any preceding work.

The first prominent showcase for Communist writing was *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology*.[11] In his "Critical Introduction" to the book, the leading Marxist intellectual Joseph Freeman remarked on the fact that in past years there had been "abstract debates" about whether "the revolutionary movement of the proletariat could inspire a genuine art" but he claimed that now there were no doubts, at least among the "most progressive minds" of the country. Freeman also remarked that at the first American Writers' Congress in 1934 – having a conference of writers was itself a new idea – writers had met and talked with each other about "specific craft problems, general literary questions, and means of safeguarding culture from the menace of fascism and war. A literary congress was possible in this country only when in the writer's mind the dichotomy between poetry and politics had vanished, and art and life were fused." He was as confident about this as he was confident about the "historic path" that the working class was now following into the "new world."

Most of the writers showcased in *Proletarian Literature in the United States* are no longer read by anyone other than specialists. Those still read include John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Kenneth Fearing, Mike Gold, Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, Richard Wright, Meridel Le Sueur, and Clifford Odets.

Much CPUSA writing tried to advance the revolution by teaching readers about the suffering of the people, first stating the cause of that suffering and then proclaiming an improved future. Poetry was ideally suited to this program, just as songs had been suited to the IWW program of earlier years, because a poem could rapidly simplify and summarize issues in memorable language. In slightly more than one hundred sharply detailed lines, for example, Tillie Olsen's

[11] Granville Hicks, Joseph North, Michael Gold, Paul Peters, Isidor Schneider, Alan Calmer (eds), *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology* (International Publishers, New York, 1935).

"I Want You Women Up North to Know" described the painful lives of three exploited Latina women in San Antonio, Texas. In "Goodbye Christ," Langston Hughes, who became a master of this sort of direct but lyrical statement, asserted that Christ had been displaced by a "real guy" named "Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME," while in "Air Raid Over Harlem" he wrote a scenario for revolution in the black capital. Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), a short autobiographical novel, worked through quick but evocative descriptions of characters and events.

Plays like Clifford Odets's short *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) were also good vehicles for Communist messages. Requiring no stage and no scenery, it was performed in many cities by amateur groups and before long was recognized as one of the great examples, perhaps the primary example, of the power of literature as a weapon. *Waiting for Lefty* taught audiences fundamental Communist beliefs about capitalism: that big business was totally focused on profit and was not "sentimental over human life," that it thought consumers were helpless sheep, that it manufactured poison gas for profit, that it liked its skilled workers to stay sober but wanted its "Pollacks and niggers" to drink because drinking "keeps them out of mischief," and that it tried to destroy unions and divide the working class. It incorporated standard Communist perceptions about corrupt, well-fed union leaders who held their membership back from radical action and "sleeping" workers who did not yet understand their actual class positions. Capturing the energy and spirit of mid-1930s unionization drives, the ultimate message of *Waiting for Lefty* was that sleeping workers could be awakened and then be rapidly radicalized to take collective action by striking for a "new world" and, if necessary, by dying for "what is right."

Communist literature often depicts people willing to die for the cause. That zeal is at the center of Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," one of the five stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940) and probably the Communist story that continues to be most read. The backdrop to the story was the CPUSA effort to organize black and white poor people in the rural South and the violent opposition of white communities. The heroine of the story, Aunt Sue, has raised

two sons who became Communists and through them her old Christian vision of the world had been "ripped from her startled eyes" and replaced with a Communist vision, expressed in the language of Christianity, that was "great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace" and in which the "meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection." Among the Communists, differences of race had been pushed aside; as one of her sons says, "Ah cant see white n Ah cant see black … Ah sees rich men n Ah sees po men." At the end of the story, Aunt Sue and one of her sons, Johnny-Boy, go to their deaths at the hands of the local sheriff but not before Aunt Sue, full of "pride and freedom," kills the Judas-like Booker who is about to inform the sheriff of the names of other Communists. The police, of course, are revealed to be ignorant and gratuitously inhumane.

Wright's other major achievement during his 1933–42 Communist phase was *Native Son* (1940), a novel that brilliantly depicts the horrifying ghetto conditions of black Chicago and their effects on the 19-year-old Bigger Thomas. Bigger commits two murders. The murder of Mary Dalton, a wealthy young white woman who is involved with a young Communist, is seemingly accidental but produces elation in Bigger; the murder of his girlfriend is premeditated. A fast-paced novel of crime and punishment, packed with extraordinary descriptive passages about the cruelties of racism, *Native Son* was a best seller. Some contemporary critics also claimed that it was the most important novel ever written by an American black writer. For non-Communist readers, it no doubt served to provide – especially those parts in which Bigger's lawyer Boris A. Max explains to Bigger what, from a Communist point of view, he actually did and why he did it – an instructional manual on how Communists thought about the world and a series of brilliant insights into the causes of black anger. For many Communist readers, of course, *Native Son* demonstrated the power of literature to represent and to inspire.

Literature which directly attacked Communist ideology, and literature which argued for conservative, individualistic, anarchistic, or libertarian positions, was also published in the 1930s and 1940s. The several southern writers and intellectuals who contributed to the

1930 collection of essays *I'll Take My Stand* argued for a rejection of "progressive" industrial culture and collectivism while maintaining that "the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and … it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers." In the left-dominated literary culture of the 1930s, *I'll Take My Stand* was almost universally regarded as retrograde and racist. Similar treatment was given E. E. Cummings's *Eimi* (1933), a journal of the author's trip to Russia in which he recorded his astonishment at the repressive, totalitarian, inhumane "unworld" of the Soviet Communist "hell." Cummings's book was met mostly with silence. But the Modernist writer Ezra Pound thought it was a major literary work. Pound, who had lived in Italy for many years and supported the fascist side in World War II, made more than one hundred pro-fascist broadcasts on Italian radio during the war. Most of them were rants against Jews, Roosevelt, liberals, Communists, and others, but during his May 21, 1942 broadcast, he held *Eimi* out as the sort of book ignorant Americans should read instead of the usual "blah about democracy, freedom, baloney."[12] (After the war, the government arrested Pound for treason and brought him back to the US to stand trial. Pound was ultimately committed to a mental institution.)

Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) was the most widely read and influential literary work that argued for the individualistic as opposed to the "collectivist" (socialist and/or Communist) view of human destiny. Mostly popularized by word of mouth – mainstream literary culture dismissed it in the 1940s and continues to dismiss it – the book sold hundreds of thousands of copies and by the 1950s had become a central text of American conservative and libertarian political culture.

The Fountainhead contains a critique of collectivism, much of it accomplished through the characterization of Ellsworth M. Toohey, a sexless, Harvard-educated socialist who makes his living as a highly regarded art and architecture critic. Toohey speaks with authority

[12] Pound's radio speeches are collected in Leonard W. Doob (ed.), *"Ezra Pound Speaking": Radio Speeches of World War II* (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1978).

about "strikes, and conditions in the slums, and the poor people in sweatshops" and he sounds very much like a CPUSA leader when he tells strikers that "History, my friends, does not ask questions or acquiescence. It is irrevocable." He aims through his work to kill individualism, to destroy individual expression and creativity by preaching other-directed altruism, and to exalt the masses. Rand's basic critique of collectivism is expressed near the end when her main character, Howard Roark, tells a jury that "The 'common good' of a collective – a race, a class, a state – was the claim and justification of every tyranny ever established over men. Every major horror of history was committed in the name of an altruistic motive." Roark was being tried for blowing up the low-income housing project he had designed because, in violation of his agreement, its design had been modified; the jury acquits him, which is to say that the jury understands the integrity of the true artist.

In *The Fountainhead*, all of the major and many of the minor characters are measured by the work they do. Toohey works at destroying the egos, the souls of other men. The newspaper publisher Gail Wynand works to prove that the masses of men and women are venal, dumb, and easily bought. The architects in the novel – it can be read as a novel partly about the profession of architecture – are judged by the buildings they produce. The men who teach at the college of architecture Roark attends and is expelled from just before graduation, are out-of-date and inept. The architect Guy Francon imitates traditional styles for his wealthy clients. The hopelessly uncreative architect Peter Keating fakes his work. Henry Cameron, a character based on the architect Louis Sullivan, is committed to his work, believing that "Architecture is not a business, but a crusade and a consecration to a joy that justifies the existence of the earth." The heroic Howard Roark, whose character is based on the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, is given many speeches by Rand in which he talks about his work. Among other things, he says that the meaning of life is to be found in work, that he became an architect because he loves the world but does not like the way things are shaped and wants to change them, and that his work is his joy. In one speech, he philosophizes on what buildings represent:

> Most people build as they live – as a matter of routine and senseless accident. But a few understand that a building is a great symbol. We live in our minds, and existence is the attempt to bring that life into physical reality, to state it in gesture and form. For the man who understands this, a house he owns is a statement of his life.

To indicate the outcomes of this philosophy, Rand provides several descriptions of the magnificent Modernist buildings Roark produces. But he is not a precious aesthete. Throughout the novel, Rand reminds readers that Roark was born into the working class, that he is largely self-educated, and that he knows how to do hard physical labor. Roark's close friend Mike, a skilled construction worker, has attitudes similar to Roark's, suggesting that true working-class heroes think of work as the highest form of self-expression: "People meant very little to Mike, but their performance a great deal. He worshipped expertness of any kind. He loved his work passionately and had no tolerance for anything save for other single-track devotions. He was a master in his own field and he felt no sympathy except for mastery."

Many important political and cultural figures have testified to the influence of *The Fountainhead* on them. Most recently, Cal Ripkin, who holds the record for the number of baseball games played without missing one, remarked that he, too, had tried to get fulfillment through his work, that he had been drawn to Rand's books, and that he had thought a good deal about Howard Roark.[13]

The Fountainhead also has a literary cultural dimension that satirizes both avant-garde writing and Communist writing. Among his other positions, Toohey is the leader of a group of avant-garde writers that includes a woman, Lois Cook, who, sounding like Gertrude Stein, says things like "It is so commonplace … to be understood by everybody" and about whom Rand is cruelly satirical in remarks like "For an author who did not sell, her name seemed

[13] Ray Robinson, "The Iron Horse and Ripkin," *New York Times*, July 29, 2007, p. SP5.

strangely famous and honored. She was the vanguard of intellect and revolt." Cook is also chairperson of the Council of American Writers, which believed that "writers were servants of the proletariat," though on some occasions the members talked more about "the tyranny of reality and of the objective" than about the proletariat. The group includes:

> a woman who never used capitals in her books, and a man who never used commas; a youth who had written a thousand-page novel without a single letter o, and another who wrote poems that neither rhymed nor scanned; a man with a beard, who was sophisticated and proved it by using every unprintable four-letter word in every ten pages of his manuscript ...

Details like those seemed to be calculated to alienate literary people enthusiastic about "experimental" writing as well as enthusiasts about Communist writing.

Ayn Rand's work aside, much of the engaged literature produced in the 1930s and early 1940s focused on the lives of "ordinary" or "everyday" Americans. Some had a CPUSA perspective, some were liberal and "progressive," and nearly all shared the view that the country was unfair and that the "People" suffered. This was a renewal of the interest of earlier writers in those they called "ordinary" or "undistinguished," an interest which crested between 1900 and 1919 in investigations of worker experience by journalists and in the fiction and poetry of writers such as Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Carl Sandburg. In the 1930s and in the World War II years, however, the concern with the situation of the "People" was not just literary and journalistic. A great number of popular movies, such as those of Frank Capra, were made that exalted common men and women. The Roosevelt administration through the WPA sent photographers, artists, and writers out to discover and to record the lives of the people and the cultures of local communities. Some of the most distinguished work was focused on the South. A panoramic view of rural poverty was presented in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1940), which featured meditative prose by James Agee and

photographs by Walker Evans. In the early 1940s, the writer Sterling A. Brown, without government funding, began a project to investigate and report on black life in the southern countryside. Brown published a few pieces of his study, but recently, John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders edited Brown's preserved manuscripts into *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (2007), a masterful descriptive analysis of rural black life.

There was a world of great books and stories full of textured, detailed, skilled representations of the lives lived by ordinary people. Meridel Le Sueur's short stories focused on women, many of them unemployed. Her short novel *The Girl* was one of the period's great representations of the lives of working-class women during the depths of the Depression; the book was not published until 1978 but parts appeared in magazines between 1935 and 1945. Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods," a 1933 short story, narrated the life of a farm woman exploited and victimized by men and her end in a strange kind of beauty that haunts the narrator for decades. Carl Sandburg's long poem *The People, Yes* (1936) was a gifted and strange compendium of facts and fictions and folk wisdom. James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, made up of *Young Lonigan* (1932), *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* (1934), and *Judgment Day* (1935), is a virtual documentary of Irish-American working-class life in Chicago. Pietro DiDonato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) narrates the lives as exploited labor lived by New York Italian-American construction workers and their families. Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941) asks all the fundamental questions about the motivations of Sammy Glick to become rich, powerful, and famous no matter what he has to do and supplies some answers in the form of its brief but luminous account of his Lower East Side Jewish upbringing; the unionization efforts of Hollywood screenwriters serves as part of the backdrop for Glick's rise. Nonfiction accounts of immigrant life published during the period included Carlos Bulosan's 1936 "Be American" and 1941 "Homecoming," Younghill Kang's *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* (1937), and Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1943). Bulosan was from the Philippines and Kang was from Korea. Mangione was born in the US to Sicilian parents.

John Steinbeck's panoramic *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) had the deepest lasting impact on American cultural history. It provided some iconic moments – for example, the images of the hardscrabble lives of southwestern tenant farmers during the 1930s drought, the Joad family trip across the Southwest in search of work, Tom's speech as he leaves the family to take up a life of union organizing, Ma Joad's speech about the endurance of the people – that still move readers. But many other great panoramic fictions appeared in this period. Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943) begins in the 1890s and ends during the 1930s, capturing the life of Bo Mason as he and his family live through hard times and occasional good times in North Dakota, Saskatchewan, Canada, the upper edges of the Northwest, Salt Lake City, and Lake Tahoe, Nevada. Bo Mason's work life seeking the big break and the big money is laid out in extraordinary detail in the novel, as are the landscapes and local cultures. An even larger panoramic book written in the period was John Dos Passos's brilliant trilogy *USA*, comprising *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936). Dos Passos follows a group of representative characters through the first three decades of the twentieth century, juxtaposing their stories against tangles of news headlines, brief but uncannily accurate biographies of major cultural figures, and subthemes having to do with labor–management relations. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, unionization is also a major element, while *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* has no such dimension (Bo and Elsa Mason have no political consciousness, never even voting in an election).

Some of the sharpest writing of the period was by southerners. Zora Neale Hurston's 1926 short story "Sweat" was an early example of what developed in her work as a very full representation of black life in central Florida. Her 1933 story "The Gilded Six Bits," her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and a number of her folklore studies – Hurston was a trained anthropologist – presented readers with nuanced, textured depictions of town and domestic life in a part of the country that had always been remote, mysterious, and subject to ridicule. Eudora Welty's early stories, the first collections of which were published in 1941 and 1943, represented mostly white folk

going about their mundane daily business in the Mississippi countryside and small towns. As in much of Hurston – but not the Hurston in stories like "Sweat" – excitement and stimulation came to Welty's characters in very small doses. In stories like "The Wide Net" and "A Worn Path," life unfolded in day-to-day routines and rituals; as Welty represented them, to ordinary people the world was a magic place full of hazards that could be overcome by perseverance and luck. Rational thought, logical analysis, and the rules of cause and effect rarely existed. There was virtually no influence of national events – the economy had always been and continued to be depressed – and there was certainly no discussion whatsoever about jobs and joblessness, labor unions, New Deal legislation, the historic destinies of the proletariat, the rise of fascism, and so forth.

William Faulkner's amazingly productive period from 1929 to the early 1940s included several novels absorbed with the never-ending effects of slavery and the Civil War, family and kinship, race and social relationships. His major work of this period – *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *The Hamlet* (1940), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942) – represented the southern present as a consequence of its past and its various historical themes as profoundly and complexly entangled. Inevitably, not so much because it was Depression-era writing but because it was set in Mississippi, the most impoverished of states for much of its history, it was also absorbed with matters of poverty and wealth, the ways people coped and sometimes achieved a measure of dignity and fulfillment, and the social processes by which some powerful families declined and others rose in the twentieth century.

As I Lay Dying was as ambitious an attempt to extensively represent the thought processes and preoccupations of poor country people as any published in the era. *Light in August*, aside from its brilliant renderings of human consciousness, contained convincing representations of rural folk culture and, at the end, in the character of Percy Grimm, something of the feel of early 1920s crazed patriotism and racism. *The Hamlet*, a sometimes comic representation of country folk, began Faulkner's extensive treatment of the rise of the

fiercely acquisitive Snopes family, which he later completed in *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959).

"Barn Burning" is an often reprinted 1938 short story featuring Ab Snopes, one of the family's progenitors. Set in the mid-1890s, it distills many of Faulkner's themes about the situations of Mississippi poor white folk in the nineteenth century and beyond. The poverty of the Ab Snopes family is clear. They are tenant farmers who move frequently. The barefoot boys of the family are unschooled and work endlessly at farm jobs; the young girls of the family are described as emanating "an incorrigible idle inertia." Hunger is alluded to in the first paragraph and later, domestic violence perpetrated or threatened by Ab occurs regularly, fear of Ab is constantly present among family members. Clear, too, is Ab's understanding of his enslavement: as he is going to talk to the man for whom he is to sharecrop, he says, "I reckon I'll have a word with the man that aims to begin to-morrow owning my body and soul for the next eight months."

As in much of the major writing of the 1930s, class antagonism runs deeply through "Barn Burning." Ab is a fearsome presence in the farming communities through which he passes because, burning the barns of his antagonists, he destroys one of the fundamental sources of their livelihoods and wealth. These economic attacks, farmland analogues to the sabotage, strikes, and other job actions expressing class antagonism in industrialized parts of the country in the 1930s as at other times, is of course seen as despicable by those who attend courtroom sessions and function as members of a chorus voicing conventional community values. At the end of the story, Ab is killed while trying to commit another attack. But the narrator seems to exalt Ab's character, referring to his "wolflike independence and even courage" at one point and at another referring to his understanding of fire "as the one weapon for the preservation of integrity." Comments like that might cause some readers to think of Ab as a sort of proletarian hero, to use the language of the CPUSA. Those details, however, are balanced by others that make Ab seem mean-minded, gratuitously destructive, and confused: his service in the Civil War motivated by his interest in accumulating booty; his war wound received when he was shot by one of his fellow Confederate

soldiers while stealing a horse; his naming of his youngest son for the Colonel under whom he served in the war, despite his hostility to authority and the upper class; his destruction of his "owner's" valuable rug by first stomping horse manure deep into its fibers and then cleaning it with corrosive lye; and his blunt racism (shared by others in the story).

The last two paragraphs show the young boy Colonel Sartoris Snopes leaving the family and beginning to remember his father as a brave hero in the ceremonial language of late nineteenth-century Civil War memorials. We, though, as readers, know a lot more than the boy about Ab's real character as a soldier and about what his impoverished life has caused him and his family to become.

A Note on World War II Deaths

There were an estimated 22 to 25 million military deaths worldwide in World War II. The death toll included 9 to 11 million Soviet soldiers, 5.5 million Germans, 3 to 4 million Chinese, and 2.1 million Japanese. Nearly 417,000 American soldiers died.

There were an estimated 34 to 47 million civilian deaths worldwide. That death toll included 12 to 14 million Soviet citizens, 7 to 16 million Chinese, 3 to 4 million Indonesians, 2.5 million Poles, and 1.0 to 2.8 million Germans. Some 1,700 US civilians died.

Between 5.1 and 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust. During their occupations of other Asian countries, it was estimated that the Japanese killed somewhere between 13 and 26 million civilians (those numbers include the Chinese and Indonesians civilian deaths listed above).

In the spring of 1945, the US began to firebomb Japanese cities, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians in the process. Firebombing involved the dropping from low altitudes of incendiary devices intended to create huge, all-consuming fires.

In early August 1945 the US dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was estimated that the Hiroshima bomb immediately killed some 70,000 to 140,000 civilians, while the Nagasaki bomb immediately killed some 70,000. More deaths occurred later from serious injuries and radiation sickness.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Americans saw photos and film footage of the liberated German concentration camps and equally appalling photos and film of some victims of the Japanese. There were also detailed reports of war atrocities during the 1945 and 1946 Nuremburg Trials of German war criminals and the Tokyo trials of Japanese war criminals. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings were the subjects of a great deal of newspaper and magazine discussion in the first two years after the war ended. Very early, there were American and worldwide discussions of whether the bombings were necessary and whether they violated conventions on the conduct of war.

John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, published as the entire August 31, 1946 issue of the *New Yorker* and shortly afterwards as a book, which narrated the experience of six individuals who lived through the bombing, was the most widely read and influential of all the early postwar accounts.