The Forgotten Man: The Rhetorical Construction of Class and Classlessness in Depression Era Media

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of the College of Arts of and Sciences
of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Lee A. Gray
November 2003
This dissertation entitled

The Forgotten Man:
The Rhetorical Construction of Class and Classlessness
in Depression Era Media

By

Lee A. Gray

has been approved for

the Individual Interdisciplinary Program

and The College of Arts and Sciences by

Katherine Jellison
Associate Professor, History

Raymie E. McKerrow
Professor, Communication Studies

Leslie A. Flemming
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
The following study is an analysis of visual and narrative cultural discourses during the interwar years of 1920-1941. These years, specifically those of the 1930s, represent a significant transitional point in American history regarding cultural identity and social class formation. This study seeks to present one profile of how the use of media contributed to a mythic cultural identity of the United States as both classless and middle-class simultaneously. The analysis is interdisciplinary by design and purports to highlight interaction between visual and oral rhetorical strategies used to construct and support the complex myths of class as they formed during this period in American history.

I begin my argument with Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal Administration's rhetorical use of two phrases which contributed extensively to the construction of a uniquely universalized image of the American citizen; the "forgotten man" and the "common man." Roosevelt's nebulous use of these phrases, created a rhetorical characterization of the "good" American citizen, one that idealized the "average" person, but remained conspicuously WASP in representation. Due to extensive media use of Farm Security Administration photographs, the trope of the "forgotten man" became an "iconic" phrase used to represent far more than a group of disenfranchised individuals living in poverty. And, because FDR's rhetorical construction of the "common man" stayed loyal to WASP ideals, unemployed white-collar workers and even those from the wealthiest classes were able to claim ownership of both idealized characterizations. Both rhetorical characterizations were furthered in other government-sponsored media, such as murals done by Works Progress Administration artists, as well as into popular media such as films. As a whole, FDR's rhetoric and other media representations became important elements in the mythic construction of America as a classless/middle-class society.
For Superman
Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude belongs to the people who supported me over the past five years by sharing food, spirits, spare change, intellect, and love: James Caplinger, Bonnie Proudfoot, Annette Steigerwald, Nanette Tummers, Susan Wood, Stacy Hall, and Issam Safa. Those who contributed much appreciated commentary, editorial, and technical expertise include: Wayne Waters, Kate Nally Anderson, Steve Zarate, Richard Sater, Susan Searles, David Savola, Melissa Jones, Tom Patin and Ray McKerrow.
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations and Films</td>
<td>8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The Trope that Colonized a Nation: Rhetorically Constructing the Forgotten Man</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: FDR and the Rhetorical Construction of the Common (Forgotten) Man</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Constructing a Visual Rhetoric of the Forgotten Man in Photographs</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Rhetorical Image of the &quot;Classless&quot; Society in WPA Murals</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Forgotten Man in Motion Pictures</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select Bibliography</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Figure 1. *Forgotten Man* (1934) by Maynard Dixon, Brigham Young University. 10
Figure 2. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, 00/00/1933, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives 34
Figure 3. *FDR, Henry Wallace, and Robert Fechner in the Shenandoah Valley, VA*, 08/12/1933, and *FDR aboard the U.S.S. Indianapolis in Trinidad*, 12/11/1936, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives 51
Figure 3.5 *FDR in Washington, Washington, DC*, 12/31/1934, and *FDR, Hugh Love, and Walter Carpenter Jr. in Warm Springs*, 11/19/1931 courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives 52
Figure 4. *Strawberry Picker, Hammond, Louisiana* (c.1937) by Ben Shahn 64
Figure 5. *Blacksmith sharpening cultivator point south of Marshall, Texas* (1939), by Russell Lee 69
Figure 5.5 *Room of Farmer in Yuba County, CA* (1939), by Russell Lee 69
Figure 6. *Plantation Overseer* (1936) by Dorothea Lange 71
Figure 7. *Farm mother with her two children, San Augustine County, Texas* (1939), by Russell Lee 73
Figure 8. *Madonna of the Meadows* (c.1505-06) by Raphael 73
Figure 9. *Jorena Pettway* (1939) by Marion Post Wolcott 88
Figure 10. *Rehabilitation client …, near Batesville, Arkansas* (c. 1938), by Carl Mydans 88
Figure 11. *Lower Piedmont Lower Piedmont* (1937) by Dorothea Lange 90
Figure 12. *Couple, Born in Slavery* (1937) by Dorothea Lange 90
Figure 13. *Gee’s Bend, Alabama* (1937) by Arthur Rothstein 91
Figure 14. *The Pope Family* (c. 1938) by John Vachon 92
Figure 15. *Migrant Mother* (1936) by Dorothea Lange 95
Figure 16. *Prelude to Afternoon Meal: Carroll County, Georgia* (1941) by Jack Delano 98
Figure 17. *Sunday Morning, White Plains, Georgia* (1941) by Jack Delano 98
Figure 18. Edward Laning and assistants at work on his mural, *The Role of the Immigrant in the Industrial Development of America* (c. 1938) Unknown photographer, National Archives, Records 69-AG-413 102
Figure 19. Detail of *Detroit Industry* (1932) north wall automotive panel by Diego Rivera. Photo: The Detroit Institute of Arts. 113
Figure 20. *Dia de las Flores* (1925) by Diego Rivera 113
Figure 21. Rockefeller Center Mural (1933) by Diego Rivera, photographed before it was destroyed. Photo: Lucienne Bloch 115
Figure 22. Study for *Underground Railroad* (1940) by James Michael Newell 117
Figure 23. *Men and Wheat* (1939) by Joe Jones 118
Figure 24. Color sketch for *Electrification* (1940) by C. David Stone Martin, Lenore City, TN 118
Figure 25. *FDR with Fala in Washington, Washington DC*, 00/00/1943, *FDR on the U.S.S. Houston off Cocos Island*, 10/09/1935, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Digital Archives 119
Figure 26. *Mail Service in the Tropics* (1937) by Rockwell Kent 121
Figure 27. *The Chosen Site* (c. 1936) by Martin Hennings, Van Buren, AL 126
Figure 28. Color Study for *Industrial Life* (c. 1937) by Seymour Fogel, Health and Human Services Building, Washington, D.C. 131

Figure 29. *Construction of the Dam* (c.1938) by William Gropper, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 136

Figure 30. *Sand Lot Riots* (completed 1947-48) by Anton Refregier, one panel from the *History of San Francisco*, Coit Tower 139

Figure 31. *The Deposition* (c.1530) by Santi di Tito Titi 139

Figure 32. *Monumental Worker* (WPA) unknown artist (possibly by Arthur G. Murphy in the *Bridge Worker* series (1935). Coit Tower, San Francisco, CA Photo: Gary B. Kulik 140

Figure 33. Color study for *The Riveter* (1938) by Ben Shahn 140

Figure 34. Color study for *Security of the Family* (c. 1939) by Seymour Fogel, Health and Human Services Building, Washington, D.C. 142

Figure 35. *One Hundredth Anniversary* (c.1938) Arnold Blanch, Columbus, WI 143

Figure 36. *Pastoral* (c.1937) Ted Gilien, Lee's Summit, MO 144

Figure 37. *Madonna and Child* (c.1508) by Raphael 145

Figure 38. *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (c.1510) by Leonardo da Vinci 145

Figure 39 *Settling the West* (c.1937) by Ward Lockwood, Post Office Federal Building, Washington D.C. 145

Films

Clip 1. *Meet John Doe* (1941) Directed by Frank Capra 149

Clip 2. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) Directed by Frank Capra 167

Clip 3. *Meet John Doe* (1941) Directed by Frank Capra 168

Clip 4. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) Directed by Frank Capra 171

Clip 5. *Gold Diggers of1933* (1933) Directed by Mervyn LeRoy (choreographed by Busby Berkeley) 173

Introduction:

The Trope that Colonized a Nation: Rhetorically Constructing the Forgotten Man

The thirties have become one of the most essential criteria by which we measure our well-being and security. But their significance transcends this. . . . [that] Americans still sing about it, write and read about it, make and watch movies depicting it, pay fascinated attention to the iconographic gallery created by contemporary photographers, attend to the testimony of its survivors, revive its music, its drama, and its fashions, attests to the profound impact the Depression has had upon our culture and our imaginations.¹

Despite this apparent interest in the Depression era, cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine found it ironic that the 1930s remain a conundrum to many scholars. Surely,

---

it was a period of immense paradoxes in economic, technological, governmental and social transitions that continue to affect Americans and non-Americans long after their occurrence. As film historian and critic Robert Sklar wrote, the thirties also represented, "the first fully conscious era of cultural mythmaking."2 New technological advances in media and forms of disseminating information to the masses brought productions of "cultural mythmaking" to prominence in the 1930s. Radios grew more popular, as did going to the movies or purchasing one of the many new magazines such as Life (which became a product of Time Inc. in 1936), Reader's Digest, and The New Yorker, available at the neighborhood newsstand. Each of these materials rendered the myths extolling the values of power, consumption, and materialism all the more provocative and accessible to the American public.

By the 1930s, communications media had become strongly integrated into the daily lives of most Americans. Some media was educational, but much of it was geared toward entertainment value. In what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer labeled the "culture industries" (1940), these popular forms of entertainment could have a profound effect in disseminating ideologies. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that popular forms of entertainment had the power to define cultural identity and to unify disparate factions of society by repeatedly reproducing the same images and messages in various media. These images relied heavily on stereotypical signs and codes which the mass public understood.

This study focuses on myths that evolved during the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s regarding a national cultural identity, specifically that of the United States as a "classless" society, but one simultaneously identified as a nation primarily comprised of "middle" class citizens. Drawing on Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s argument examining the importance of visual and oral rhetorical devices in shaping individual and group identity, specifically as these relate to American cultural identity regarding social class, I consider two contrasting myths that emerged specifically in conjunction with the Depression decade of the 1930s. I contend that paradoxical myths regarding America as both a "classless" society and one simultaneously occupied by a "middle" class majority, were equally important to forming public policies and psychological discourses

---

in reaction to the economic and social upheavals of this period.\textsuperscript{3} I will address the contradiction between the "classless" and "middle" class myths as forms of national identity developed in public discourses, looking particularly closely at these myths through one specific trope, that of the "forgotten man."

The trope of the forgotten man is a phrase that so succinctly defined Depression-era sentiments that it became almost iconic, like Dorothea Lange’s \textit{Migrant Mother}. The phrase became symbolic of an entire nation experiencing the flux of economic and social change. Often conflated with the concept of the \textit{common man}, the visual and rhetorical representations of the forgotten man were used to codify the image of the dis-empowered worker into the image of the empowered citizen who looked and acted much like the white Protestant Anglo-Saxon ruling elite. I contend that the visual rhetoric of the period was instrumental in creating the perception of social class unification which ultimately formed a national identity of classlessness, while simultaneously creating the contradictory perception of America as a middle-class society consisting of a majority of equally powerful and like-minded citizens. What made this middle-class image so appealing to politicians and cultural producers was the homogeneity of the fictive citizen seen to embody essential American characteristics, values and interests, and therefore, the embodiment of a democratic social order.

Within the abstract concept of classlessness lies the equally nebulous concept of a middle class thought to be the representative image of the essential American (citizen) character. Conceptions of America as a “classless” society, given its doctrine of democracy and its capitalistic economy, assume that one can move freely between social stratifications because one is not fixed in a caste system. I suggest that the image of America as a classless society was, in large part, constructed during the 1935 to 1943 period when Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal administration experimented with work relief programs in an attempt to restore economic stability and national order. Programs were created to help artists and intellectuals benefit from the relief offered through government employment. Seen as members of the deserving poor, these skilled workers enlisted in service to a cultural war affecting the nation. Not only did artists benefit financially, but they contributed to Roosevelt’s oratory of a common American

\textsuperscript{3} Benjamin DeMott, \textit{The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class} (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 29-42. Refer to DeMott for concepts of classlessness.
character, represented by his rhetorical image of the forgotten (common) man, by providing visual models of images FDR used to identify “good” American citizens.

I begin by considering the oral rhetoric of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the visual representations of social class produced in New Deal government-sponsored programs such as the Farm Security Administration’s History Section and the Federal Art Program under the Works Progress Administration. In addition, contributions by motion picture narratives representing perceptions of classlessness and the construction of a middle class will be evaluated. At the foundation of my study are concepts of visual culture and visual rhetoric. Both are drawn from theoretical discourses associated with the criterion of cultural studies, specifically theories regarding representation, identity formation and cultural hegemony. I also analyze specific “texts” to demonstrate how visual and verbal rhetoric contributed to ideological hegemony and how that hegemony was practiced and disseminated to create a national cultural identity.

The phrases “classless” and “middle class” are used to define the contradictory nature of social organization as it is currently understood to exist in the U.S.4 Both derive from an abstract notion of essentialism as a condition of natural or inherent cultural characteristics. The first manifestations of an essential Americanism may be traced to the writings of French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville, who first praised the merits of American democracy and the mutable possibilities of its social structure during his tour of the states in the 1830s. In his book Democracy in America, first published in English in 1835, de Tocqueville wrote about the lack of aristocracy and “classism” in the U.S., citing it as a truly unique and original country.5 De Tocqueville’s book was enormously popular in Europe and influenced many important political leaders of the 19th century. Since that time, those outside of the U.S. have perceived it as having a social paradigm unique in the history of the western world, i.e. a caste-less classlessness not practiced in other western societies. Though disparity between the wealthy and the poor is apparent to all who live or visit the U.S. now, the belief that all Americans have an opportunity to move about freely without division by social class is commonly held by foreigners and Americans alike, suggesting that the U.S. is indeed a "classless" society.


5 http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_index.html
The image of a common man or common American character had roots in the 18th and 19th centuries. The rhetoric of both the common man and the forgotten man appeared in popular 19th century literature as well as in the rhetoric of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Both myths had an enormous impact on the general understanding of what it meant to be an American and what Americans valued. The most outstanding element of this public discourse was the mythic construction of a working class whose ethics of solidarity and hard work were congealed with the status of middle-class morality, patriotism, and consumption. By the late 19th century, Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmer had become a distinctly American symbol of the dignity of labor and the autonomy of the worker in a frontier environment. For both Jefferson and Jackson, however, the common man ideal was really an alias for the upper-class property-owning citizen, men of their own genteel status. Theirs was also a highly masculinized image based on the European paradigm of social relations regarding gender, race, and social class. Thus, their rhetoric of the common man merely disguised their perceptions of a "good" citizen whose attributes were actually those of the ruling elite.

The characteristics of Jefferson’s and Jackson’s version of the average American transformed during the economic transition brought on by industrialization at the turn of the century. The separation of industrialists from hands-on participation in labor created a much greater schism between differing groups, both of whom could lay claim to the qualities identified with the “average” American. The land-owning ruling class maintained control of those forces which disseminated information clearly allowing them to co-opt the idealized image and adapt the corresponding mythology to their own needs. The transition from an agrarian economy to one based on industry created widespread squalor, strife, and massive personal alienation among many who could once identify themselves, even remotely, as average Americans because of participation in the agrarian economy as skilled craftsmen, merchants, or farmers. On the foundation of this fractured mythology, FDR’s rhetoric resonated anew, as it gave hope to the truly forgotten that they once again could participate as valued equals in a mutable society.

---

Interestingly, Frank Freidel argues that no one in the 1920s had been "more ardently Jeffersonian" than FDR. Roosevelt saw Jefferson as an advocate for the common man, but as his opponents increasingly began to co-opt the "aristocratic" Jeffersonian perspective of individualism, FDR defended his policies from a more Jacksonian perspective.7

**Framework of this Study**

The combination of methodologies employed in this study derives from an eclectic assortment of critical perspectives incorporating diverse approaches to cultural studies. Douglas Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham have summarized that "[a]n increasingly complex, culturally hybrid and diasporic world calls for sophisticated understandings of the interplay of representations, politics, and the forms of media."8 Cultural studies approaches offer the critic ways to address these problematics. Hence, rather than pursue one particular method or analysis, I have chosen to follow the "critical rhetoric" perspective asserted by M.C. McGee in *Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture*. Critical rhetoric combines critical methods from both literary criticism and rhetorical studies. Following McGee, I begin my analysis of cultural "texts" with the assumption that "all finished discourses presupposed taken-for-granted cultural imperatives." This means that any "text" contains cultural assumptions, conventions, and selections, which determine its ultimate significance in social context.9 McGee directs us to consider cultural imperatives, which "give voice to the silences of [conventional wisdom] doxa." If, as McGee suggests, we "can infer that the discourse derives its rhetorical power more from the silence of the cultural imperative than from the imperative itself," we grow closer to understanding how discourses communicate meaning in social context. Furthering his argument, McGee notes that comprehension of any discourse, or finished "text," is not possible without "context."10 He writes, "the elements of 'context' [are] so important to the 'text' that one cannot discover, or even discuss, the *meaning* of 'text' without reference to them."11 Without knowledge of

---

10 McGee, 281
11 McGee, 283
context, the significance of the "text" remains a "fragment" (McGee's term) of cultural property. Thus, I have based my analysis of how the two opposing myths of classlessness and middle class came to co-exist in the national and international psyche by examining the varying fragments -- from speeches to photographs to film -- that came together in defining the American culture. In doing so, I am following McGee's interpretation of the critic as "inventor" in constructing from these fragments a cohesive, coherent interpretation of the role the parenthetical myths played.

In a practical sense, this study integrates both the political economy approach to cultural texts and the sociological interpretation of representative cultural texts. One method considers the production and distribution of culture and the relations among the economic, political, technological, and cultural dimensions of social reality, and the other considers how people respond to these elements of cultural identity and social position. The political economy approach is not so much a study of economic approaches as it is the relationships of economy and polity, culture and people, and the interconnection between production and consumption, distribution and use. Technology plays an especially important role in the political economy of culture and in disseminating the dominant forms of ideology. The system of production often determines what type of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be and what can and cannot be said or shown in specific artifacts.

The reader should remember that prior to the 1920s the American "middle class" was really a small minority of white-collar workers who owned businesses or worked in some "middle" management position. Only when industrialization and urbanization grew to the point where white-collar jobs enabled those workers to consume products such as household appliances, radios, automobiles, and department store clothing, normally associated with the higher income classes, did the concept of a central kind of social class emerge. Simultaneously, blue-collar members of the working class were able to consume items once considered luxuries or accoutrements of their more prosperous neighbors in the white-collar working class. Paradoxically, this juncture of class

---

12 McGee, 280
13 Martin Marger, Elites and Masses: An Introduction to Political Sociology, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1987), 5-6, and Kellner and Durham, 18-23.
appropriation occurred simultaneously with the economic disasters of the early 20th
century. 14

Cultural Context

Fully comprehending the devastation and complexity affecting the U.S. during the
interwar years requires a review of cultural and historical contexts, and the importance of
social class as an outgrowth of these contexts. The 1930s was a tumultuous time in
American history. The decade is remembered for the long Midwestern drought, lingering
effects of the stock market crash in 1929, millions of unemployed, and the migration of
southern farm workers traveling west in search of employment and a decent living. But
the thirties are also noted for the many positive advances which occurred such as the
many new experimental government policies and programs implemented under Franklin
D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" administration. For the first time in American history the
government became a patron of the arts, and under government sponsorship, women,
African-Americans, and southern and eastern European immigrants received new
opportunities for jobs and wages equal to those of their American-born white male co-
workers. Laws to protect children from enslaved labor and financial security for the
elderly and disabled made life seem a bit less harsh. Laborers in the automobile, steel,
mining, and textile industries unionized and farmers received assistance to build and
reform agricultural practices. With electricity available to much of the nation, people
tuned-in to hear their favorite radio programs and news of the day. The entertainment
industry increased its widespread popularity and influence on popular culture with the
addition of sound to movies.

The 1930s remains a decade of paradoxes. The period reflects one of the most
chaotic periods of American history in that the changes from prosperity to poverty were
quick and extreme in their formation of cultural experience and cultural knowledge.
Economic chaos had a somewhat leveling effect on Americans, causing people from all
walks of life to feel that they were sharing in the distress of "bad times." But at the same
time, government relief and reform programs as well as popular media continued to
maintain the cultural paradigm that structured the social hierarchies of gender, race,
ethnicity, and class.

14 refer to work by Warren Susman, Lawrence Levine, and Susan Ware.
Cultural historian Warren Susman has deemed this period as one representing a new kind of interaction between consciousness and culture, resulting in an attitude he calls a “cultural concern” for the relationship between communication and experience.\(^{15}\) Another significant change occurred in new forms of cultural knowledge and experience and that was the emphasis on personality versus character. This change was most obvious in motion pictures where “stars” and spectacle were emphasized over plot. Movie stars epitomized the interest in personality over the measure of one’s integrity, morality, and hard work. Additionally, it was a period that nurtured a desire for consumption. Consumption was so important in the politics of the 1930s, as Lawrence Levine notes, that “the consumer was called, with reason, the ‘forgotten man.’”\(^{16}\) For similar reasons, Susman has called this period the “culture of abundance” because of the attention to consumption, but consumption of material goods was only part of the story, for along with the availability of so many products came a new sensibility about identity and place.\(^{17}\) Not surprisingly, many conservatives found the challenge to tradition, social order, and the merging of disparate elements a threatening concern for the future of American democracy.\(^{18}\)

Susman observed that “while the camera, the radio, and the moving picture were not new [to the 1930s], . . . the sophisticated uses to which they were put created a special community of all Americans [that was] previously unthinkable.”\(^{19}\) These changes in use represented a shift to a culture of sight and sound and increased American self-awareness as a culture. They also helped create a unity of response and action not previously possible.\(^{20}\) When projected through the mass media, this appeal was transformed into a discourse identifying the worker as a citizen in a national social formation. Here, with all its ambiguity, lay the effectiveness of the appeal to popular traditions and the construction of a national culture.


\(^{16}\) Levine, 222


\(^{18}\) Susman, *Culture as History,* xx.

\(^{19}\) Susman, *Culture as History,* 160.

\(^{20}\) Levine, 288.
Visual media became so readily available to the masses in the early decades of the 20th century that the need for visual literacy became an important element in all social interactions and processes. Visual media was not only pervasive but it created a new cultural language by borrowing from other media and repeating images or ideas so that certain visual metaphors became part of the cultural language. The cowboy and Indian, for example, became standard iconographic elements of American geography, history, and cultural ideology metaphorically linked to ideas about freedom, democracy, entitlement, heroic conquest, and untamed land and peoples. It was important to develop this visual language because so many immigrants did not comprehend spoken or printed language, but could understand the visual metaphors and organize their understanding of America and its culture accordingly.

Discourses circulating in the U.S. during the decade of the great Depression came together to form a unified cultural identity based on the concept of equal opportunity for all, and predicated on the concepts of democracy and state capitalism. The rhetoric of President Franklin D. Roosevelt -- along with new communications media such as radio, film, nationally syndicated newspapers and magazines, and the public artworks created by Works Progress Administration and Farm Security Administration artists -- forged an American identity as a unified democratic nation with mutable social class status and, therefore, a “classless” form of social organization. In this mind set anyone, even the most unfortunate, had an opportunity to join the ruling class. Though, because the ruling-elite were often characterized as evil, corrupt, greedy, and power-hungry, most citizens preferred to identify themselves in a social position "below" the ruling-class. Given the characterization of social classes in the 1930s, concepts of one unified "middle class" seemed only logical. Dis-empowered workers, particularly immigrant, agricultural, and blue and white-collar laborers, equated themselves with the rhetorical forgotten man as Roosevelt symbolized him. Discourses on labor and class reflected tensions resulting from the changing nature of work and the transformation from an agrarian economy to one based on industry. Once Roosevelt identified the sentiments of workers and made reference to them as the forgotten ones, he quickly manipulated his rhetoric to the more inclusive phrase "common man,” establishing a sense of unity among all workers. The brilliance of this strategy should not be overlooked as it was the concept of unity that Roosevelt most depended on to diminish public fears resulting from economic, social, geographic, and racial tensions. Within this
context, Roosevelt perpetuated the myth of American classlessness, while simultaneously uniting the nation into a shared identity as "middle-class" citizens. Roosevelt's rhetoric implied an economic and social equality among citizens that was neither fact nor possibility.

The Importance of Class

Discussions of the interactions of class, race, ethnicity, and gender present certain challenges in light of contemporary postmodern identity politics. Other than considerations of “Otherness,” few scholars analyze these characteristics in unison, choosing instead to focus their analysis on one characteristic at a time. But we all know that one cannot separate one’s class from one’s race, ethnicity, or gender. To speak publicly about social classes in the U.S. is to break some unwritten taboo. We seem much more comfortable admitting our racial tensions and less willing to acknowledge class anxieties. No wonder, then, classism is all too often confused and subsumed behind racism as the prevailing social tension in American society. Indeed, the self-identification of most Americans and the rhetoric surrounding them in political debates or prime-time sit-coms relates not so much to the image of classlessness as to the image of one class -- a mono-class -- which we understand to be composed of the majority, average, centrist class, flanked by two smaller classes of the very poor and the very rich. People in these marginal classes are seldom represented in anything other than political campaigns (and movies) because it is assumed they occupy a more fixed status by choice or circumstance and therefore do not participate in or share values with the majority, i.e. the middle-class norm.

We consider the image of middle America to be the norm believing it represents the vast majority of Americans. In fact, the paradigm of class in the U.S. has several conflicting definitions which seem to conflate depending on perception and context. One is the mutable theory: the rags to riches story that assures anyone born to a lowly class position may move out of that status if he or she has, among other things, the “appropriate” character--namely work ethic, talent, intellect, and perseverance. A second theory argues that the majority of Americans share similar economic, religious, educational, and consumer tastes. This is assumed to be the average and normal state of most Americans, with those in the lower and upper classes comprising only a miniscule portion of the entire population. Part of what makes the middle-class position seem normal and appropriate is the assumption that those who exist in the lower of the
marginal classes deserve their stations because of either their own character traits or personal flaws, for example laziness. A corollary holds that those in the highest class arrived there through personal sacrifice, achievement, or luck. Corruption and manipulation may also be seen as paths to power and prosperity, but they are never part of the cultural ideal. Though one’s path to wealth and power may not have been a completely honest one, those who exist in this state are more easily forgiven trespasses because they have risen to a higher social status.

There are four primary reasons why the Depression era allowed and encouraged the concept of America as a one-class society and why that image has remained constant into the 21st century:

- Industrialization had a firm hold on the American economy and way of life by the mid-1920s. More consumer goods became available at a cheaper price to a larger number of people, thus blurring the lines between class differences based on buying power.
- With the economy in shambles after the stock market crash of 1929, people were much more willing to seek reform and alternatives to the previous structure of society. While not everyone was shocked by the phenomenon that the social structure needed major reform, enough people were to create desperation for new ideas and renovations to a failed system.
- Increased numbers of and easier access to popular media forms such as newspapers, films, and magazines established a visible image of what “middle-class” Americans looked like, what they bought, how they lived, and what kinds of activities they engaged in for labor and leisure. These images of middle-class Americans also provided visible documentation of what was acceptable and what was not for the average American.
- Changing political regimes in Europe and the Soviet Union provided examples of what Americans did not want. In their desire to distance themselves from Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, Americans deliberately sought to make themselves noticeably different from their neighbors and past alliances. Thus, the administration and those with the power and access to influence cultural representations turned within to find (and construct) an essence that would clearly identify America and its citizens as a unique entity.21

I intend to write as inclusively as I can about the construction of American identity as it exists and not as it is imagined. In Silent Witnesses: Representations of Working-Class Women in the United States, Jacqueline Ellis has articulated my own definition of social class, writing that "by working-class, I do not only mean poor white, or African-

---

American, or single mother, or tenant farmer, I mean a position that is dis-empowered – economically, socially, and politically – in relation to the institutionalized power of those who claim to represent and speak for it; and dis-empowered in comparison with the sections of American society for whom that image or speech is intended to be received. I further delineate the definition of working class by separating it into the blue-collar class and the white-collar class because this is where, I believe, the formation of our current view of the mono "middle" class began. Prior to the 1930s, social mores separated those who worked with their hands, craftsmen for instance, from those who worked with their minds, such as land-owners. The early decades of the 20th century witnessed a change in this distinction, culminating in the merging of blue and white-collar classes during the Depression decade. It was at this juncture that American society became simultaneously identified as both classless and middle class, with tensions between the once-clearly distinguished classes confronted and contested through the new forms and range of communication technologies.

Of course, one can hardly discuss social class without mentioning Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Much of the current research done on social stratifications depends on re-readings of Marx and his theory of the base (labor) and the superstructure (social consciousness) in defining cultural ideology. Marx concluded that the class system “shaped the entity of the state for the good of its ruling class.” I believe Franklin Roosevelt understood this as a necessity to the success of a capitalist economy. For FDR, these concepts supported democracy and he apparently saw no contradiction between certain concepts derived from Marx, such as the value of worker contributions to the economic well-being of the country.

FDR’s savvy at reading the public was part of his leadership genius. That the image he created of the “forgotten man” soon became his representative “common man” is tribute to his brilliance at comprehending public needs, attitudes, and desires. I will argue that members of various social classes colonized the concept of a forgotten man, ultimately coalescing it into the image of a unified nation of citizens existing in one common centralized class. The definition of colonization I wish to invoke here derives

from the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who notes that the term "colonization" is predominantly discursive. It is used in scholarship to focus on a certain mode of appropriation and codification “knowledge” in cultural or mass identity formation. According to Mohanty in *Under Western Eyes*, "[T]he term colonization has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writings in general . . . . From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxism, colonization has come to describe the appropriation of experiences and struggles by hegemonic movements."24 As Mohanty suggests, the concept of colonization refers to practices that support groups vying for hegemony over other groups. The forgotten man trope was a representative image that, I argue, was colonized for ruling-class hegemony. Roosevelt did this by transforming the image of the forgotten man into an idealized version of an every man (woman) through his frequent rhetoric regarding the "common man." Evidence of this transformation can be found in government programs that produced visual representations consistent with FDR's rhetoric. Those programs include the Resettlement Administration (RA) which later became the Farm Security Administration (FSA), and the Federal Art Project (FAP) under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), developed as part of Roosevelt's New Deal administration.

The progression from forgotten man to common man was subtle, but consistent with the policy needs for economic and social order which Roosevelt sought to restore. The transformation of these representative images acted as a form of ruling-class hegemony because it gave people a tangible form with which to identify their psychological position as well as the direction to become one of the "fold"—a common man rather than a forgotten one. A similar transformation process was often the topic of Depression era films where the wealthy American (a subject of disdain at that time) was "returned to the fold" (valued citizen) by using his or her power and/or prestige to help the forgotten man.

As a form of ruling-class colonization, the phrase "forgotten man" has come to represent a middle-class every-man as it functions in political and visual rhetoric today—just as it did in the 1930s. In this study I articulate the transformation of how concepts of social class were distorted by the culture industries of film and radio and through

---

government programs such as the FSA, WPA and FAP. These influential popular discourses demonstrate the various and complex ways in which the rhetoric of a "common man class," the middle class, colonized the working classes, populated largely by first and second generation immigrants. They also show how popular disdain for the wealthiest Americans was softened, adjusted and aligned with the values of this idealized central group. Of most interest to this discussion is how the representation of the forgotten man became that of the common man or “average” American through the speeches of FDR and through re-presentation in popular media.

Cultural productions such as murals, sculpture, photographic records, and stage productions created under FDR’s New Deal administration are one of the primary reasons the 1930s and the Great Depression remain so accessible to us now. However, the way we interpret these cultural productions, particularly Farm Security Administration photographs, has undergone a transformation over the years since first serving to educate, politicize, and document American culture. Though they remind us of a time when things were not so prosperous, nor life so easy, these artworks have nevertheless become sentimental icons of a time past. Distance has made them more poetic, more romantic, and more implausible. Now we also look back with a slight degree of nostalgia for a simpler time; a time when people seemed more connected to each other. Of course that was hardly the reality everywhere in the 1930s, but through the softening lens of hindsight, visual documents of history may seem gentler.

Polity and Peril: The Transformative Power of Rhetorical Imagery in Word and Art

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president of the U.S. in 1933 he promised a “new deal” for the American people. While he did not specify what kind of new deal he envisioned, his words became a synonym for hope to many of the nation’s most desperate citizens. Faced with the unprecedented task of leading the nation out of devastating economic chaos, FDR instituted a three-part program of relief, recovery, and reform. But beyond the necessity to “fix” the country's immediate economic problems, FDR also had to deal with the possibilities of human reaction to social dis-array. The psychological nature of people in tumult runs the gamut from revolution to despair, and it was just as necessary for FDR to attend to this aspect of national crisis as it was to the material aspects of the economy. Roosevelt no doubt felt tremendous pressure to ease not only the reality of suffering but the psychology of fear and mistrust that accompanied
it. Hence, if we consider the rhetoric of FDR’s political discourse we find that he created images of American history, the American citizen, and the American form of democracy that have continued to buttress cultural knowledge ever since.

FDR formulated a “common” identity that suited the concepts of American democracy and capitalism. As Stephen Baskerville and Ralph Willett wrote in Nothing Else to Fear: New Perspectives on America in the Thirties, political, social and economic ideologies all competed for the public’s attention during the Depression. Government, business, and labor organizations, as well as many other institutions and individuals, vied with one another to promote a dominant interpretation of the Depression’s significance to the future of American society. In the words of Baskerville and Willett,

At stake was the country’s collective identity; for it is primarily by the assimilation of such explanatory patterns that the lives, relationships, habits and ambitions of ordinary citizens are invested with societal significance. . . Americans might either become reconciled to the harsh institutional dynamics of corporate capitalism or else choose to control and moderate their effect. They might even reject capitalism altogether in favor of some alternative system: perhaps socialism, perhaps fascism, perhaps something fundamentally new. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find that the creation and promotion of ideological images became one of the few growth industries of the decade.

This study demonstrates that the political rhetoric used by Franklin Delano Roosevelt to unify the country and calm the psychological tumult of the nation did little to transform the established social order. Though the Roosevelt administration never promised to create a new cultural paradigm, the emphasis its leaders placed on the “average” American inspired formulation of utopian strategies for a new form of “enlightened” civilization. Americans had lost faith in their national institutions, so they needed reassurance that their values and aspirations were intact, to see that they were moving ahead and not falling behind. Most of all, FDR had to restore American trust in capitalism, and he did so by utilizing the concept of welfare capitalism already in place and practiced in the private sector, albeit not in any standardized or government regulated form. Thus, his New Deal administration basically restored people’s faith in

25 Baskerville and Willett, 4.
26 Baskerville and Willett, 5.
the values of capitalism and bridged the gap between the real and the imaginary – the reality of life both as they experienced it and as they wished it could be. Unfortunately, FDR’s rhetoric of equality failed to include a new vision of social order to replace the old paradigm of social hierarchies based on race, gender, and economic class. Government-sponsored art works seldom depicted those who had power over the production and profit of labor. Rather, they constructed an image of the ideal American to represent the perfect “dis-empowered” citizen in a capitalist economy. Hence, representations of committed workers, happy homemakers, and acquiescent racial and ethnic groups maintained a social structure that benefited capitalism and undermined the kind of liberal democracy FDR professed to admire.

Wrapped in the contrasting ideologies of democracy and capitalism, forgotten man/common man (American citizen) representations increasingly became associated with the white-collar class. President Roosevelt’s rhetorical use of these terms did little to adequately define either phrase and thus they were easily co-opted by various groups, most specifically by artists who sought to provide a visual definition of the otherwise nebulous terms used in social discourses, and by Roosevelt himself to establish a universalized myth of America as a large mono-class society, one in which everyone would eventually reside in an equally powerful central position and therefore exist as a true and successful democratic nation. The repetition of this myth implied that social class was a mobile or mutable process, something that one could choose as long as one acted according to the rules of American democracy. Not only did these images formulate the idealized character of the “average” American, they also made middle-class values the desired norm.

**Visual Texts as Rhetorical Imagery**

In reference to the idea of visual texts I will consider two points in this study. First, I will explore the function of the visual arts produced within government-sponsored relief programs as necessary and beneficial tools in creating the mythic image of the “average” American. Visual communication forms proved an essential element to creating representative images of both the average American and the myth of a stable and fruitful democracy, directly reflecting the rhetoric of President Roosevelt. In order to do so, a semiotic language was developed by artists and those in the popular visual media of movies, comic strips, advertising and photographs, as well as in popular magazines and newspapers, all of which echoed and supported FDR’s rhetoric about a
democratic society and the progress of capitalism. Secondly, I argue that FDR and those working for government relief arts programs encouraged the concept of America as a mutable society, more specifically a mutable class order, with the majority of Americans living between two smaller exceptional classes: the very poor and the very wealthy. This notion of exceptional classes places people in positions on the outside of the norm and assumes that one could only attain either status level by either a personal flaw or personal luck and talent. I argue that institutional apparatuses have constructed the notion of an “average” American, as we currently understand that to be, for the benefit of the prevailing capitalist ideology. Providing a variety of examples, each chapter will illustrate how specific media formulated the image of the forgotten man as a member of a particular social class.

Like verbal or written language, visual “texts” are tools and sites of abstract meaning. Early studies of culture greatly relied on the use of language in determining cultural formation and practice, but more recent scholars have separated the study of visual language from that of written language. The resulting approach to cultural analysis is considered to be a study of visual culture. In Visual Culture: The Reader, edited by Stuart Hall and Jessica Evans, visual culture is defined as the “existence of particular structures for the gaze, for seeing and for the excitement, desire, voyeurism or fear in looking; . . . a physical and psychical place for individual spectators to inhabit.” Hall and Evans explain it as “a shift from thinking art, to thinking visual, and from thinking history to thinking culture.” Simply put, visual culture is thinking in terms of particular and historically specific combinations of meanings and subjects. Visual culture includes all media, mediums, and forms of visual communication and visual practice. One would be hard pressed to escape some kind of visual literacy in the 21st century given the abundance of visual imagery surrounding us in nearly every aspect of our lives. Consequently, the analysis of visual language becomes necessary to comprehending the complexity of any culture, particularly as it relates to understanding identity formation.

Rhetorical studies have now become part of visual disciplines such as art history and comprise a large part of any cultural studies scholarship. Rhetoric, as a discipline,
was once seen as the study of persuasion (Scott, 1959), but is now more likely to be viewed as the study of practical reasoning because it is now concerned with epistemology as a way of knowing (Toulmin, 1958) or used to discover and understand knowledge (St. Clair, 2000). No doubt the evolution of the study of language or rhetoric has been affected by the influx of visual media in the 20th century. Hence, no understanding of 20th century culture can ignore the overwhelming impact that visual information has had on ways of knowing or comprehending culture, and by extension, identity. Therefore, this analysis of cultural identity formation includes the study of visual imagery as a form of persuasive language, the power of which was used by the ruling-class to construct and maintain their cultural hegemony over national ideologies.

As an element of visual communication, visual rhetoric consists of components which combine to form meaning in a particular visual 'text' -- the structure in which visual information is presented and for what purpose. I argue that visual rhetoric is a form of persuasive language since it includes such rhetorical devices as narration, description, illustration through example, emotive persuasion, logic, and the use of analogical reasoning to arrive at meaning. Visual rhetoric also includes the use of visual metaphor as a way to share cultural knowledge.

**Visualizing Culture: Representation and Meaning**

Cultural theorists argue that the need to control certain elements of society motivates formation of a visual language or style. Visual representation aids the process of hegemony by constructing “documents” of truth. Theoretical works by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes, and Jean Baudrillard have contributed to concepts of cultural signifying practices such as the construction of meaning, and how meaning is consumed through cultural practices. Each of these theorists has articulated ways in which cultural groups assign meaning through representation, both verbal and visual. Their work has added to our current understanding of cultural formation, particularly in forming individual and group identities, and in explaining how identity intersects with other forms of social control, social order, and social interactions. Their efforts have added much to the theoretical framework of this study.

In “The Culture Industry,” Adorno and Horkheimer argue that all cultures create and reinforce a visual language that everyone within that culture understands, such as industries which create or depend on visual, textual and aural communication, and forms
such as film, radio, magazines, and comic books. Accordingly, those who represent or work for the dominant culture use and maintain the language and style preferred by the ruling group. Producers and directors of culture continually repeat devices to create a language that everyone understands. The style of the work then becomes natural to the audience and part of the cultural lexicon. Unfortunately, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, in this process the audience loses the ability to distinguish between truth and artifice.29

In the introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall writes, “culture is not a set of things, but rather a system of values and meanings which are understood by a group of people who interpret things in similar ways. Culture, then, depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them and 'making sense' of the world in similar ways.”30 Hall also argues that meaning comes to be a shared form of knowledge based in the words we use, the stories we tell, the images we produce, the emotions we associate with representations, the ways we classify and conceptualize images and meanings, and the values we place on representations.31 Of course, members of a culture must be able to comprehend the meaning of images beyond their initial level of recognition. They must understand the deeper meanings based on their awareness of history, popular culture, and the values of their society. Symbolism thus becomes inherently necessary to any social or cultural identity.

Roland Barthes refers to this deeper level of comprehension as the level of myth, the culmination of reading the signifiers (image/idea) and comprehending them as a (complete) sign. According to Barthes, this ideology expresses the dominant culture through the repetition and style of images and ideas, to the point where they become normalized in the culture. Cultural myths, then, exist through the repetition of these images/ideas to produce shared knowledge among members of a cultural group. Barthes describes how both the system of interpretation and objectivity of signs are used to construct beliefs and historical myth.32 The images and concepts surrounding the

31 Hall, *Representation*, 3.
"common man," or "average" American, have become so naturalized in the cultural psyche that they have also created a specific historical memory of America as a culture and a nation. The fact that Americans have so desired to believe the fiction is significant in the creation of the historical myth. One example of cultural mythmaking created by artists in federal art programs of the 1930s was an allegorical image of the "worker" as the "heart and soul of the nation." In the process, they created simulations of a past and present reality, not accurate representations of the realities of hunger, despair, exploitation, racism, and sexism. When these more unsavory elements of social culture appeared in public artworks, they did not appear as flaws in the system or as dangerous belief patterns in need of extensive reform, but rather as significations of a solid American character able to endure great hardships.

Like Barthes, Stuart Hall argues that in actual existence, messages have a complex structure of dominance because institutional power relations imprint them at all levels of coding and decoding. However, Hall also notes that if no meaning is understood by a receiver there will be no "consumption" of the message. His concept of consumption corresponds with Barthes’ account of how interactions between institutions and popular discourses produce hegemony. Historical myths and cultural identities cannot be produced or assimilated if they are not accepted by the population most vulnerable to the exploitation of certain messages. Baudrillard, Barthes, and Hall agree that meaning develops over time through the process of repetition or practice. I submit in this study that the rhetorical devices used by President Roosevelt and his New Deal Administration were fundamental in creating the myth of America as a mono-class society.

Under government sponsorship the three most influential programs of the New Deal administration in regards to visual communication were the Farm Security Administration’s History Section, the Section of Painting and Sculpture, and the Federal Arts Project. Their influence came from their greater visibility to the general public through print media, artistic exhibitions and their presence in federal and state buildings around the country. Consequently, they had more potential effect on the government’s audience than other programs. While each of the mediums under government patronage had their own characteristics and limitations, they consistently presented the same overall themes which functioned to support the myth of unity, democracy, and the success of capitalism. These themes clearly benefited FDR’s goals for the nation.
While no one media was solely responsible for creating a representative “forgotten man,” each contributed to discourses on democracy, citizenship, Americanism, and economic transformation in unique and lasting ways. Neither can any one approach or methodology address the array of complexities in any kind of cultural or social analysis. Nonetheless, the work of semiologists, cultural theorists, and cultural historians has supplied the language and methodology I use in analyzing the visual culture of federally commissioned artwork between 1935 and 1943, as well as the connection to popular communication mediums such as film and radio during the interwar period. In the end, the reforms of Roosevelt’s New Deal administration hardly changed concepts about social order regarding race, class, and gender, but the concept of America as a mono-class society living in an ideal democracy reached new heights. Consequently, visual rhetoric formulated in public forms of visual communication would prove vital to constructing a national identity, mythology, and history of the Depression era.

**Structuring the Argument**

I begin, in Chapter One, with FDR’s oral and written rhetoric of the forgotten man as demonstrated in his political speeches and radio addresses to the nation between his 1932 election to office and America’s 1941 entry into World War Two. Franklin Roosevelt first used the concept of the forgotten man in a 1932 speech on the economic emergency facing the nation. Though he used the phrase “forgotten man” only once in the speech, its sentiment was not lost on his audience. In this speech FDR linked the health of the economy to the interdependence of agriculture and industry, from the most basic forms of production to the more complex, drawing attention to the necessity of the work done by those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Titling such a speech with this phrase was a useful rhetorical strategy because the forgotten man image humanized the economic paradigm change suggested in Roosevelt’s speech. It accurately characterized and represented many who felt dis-empowered by social status, gender, race, or ethnicity and these people could easily understand FDR’s language.

In Chapter Two, I illustrate how Farm Security Administration photographs represented and constructed the concept of the forgotten man as members of a lower working-class: tenant farmers, migrant workers, sharecroppers, and those most hit by the agricultural drought of the 1920s and 1930s. The economic transition from an
agrarian economy to an industrial one affected agricultural workers more severely. They undoubtedly felt forgotten and feared the tumult of change more than others who benefited from the emerging economic system. Urban industrial workers shared their fear with agricultural workers since the industrial economy which supported them suffered greatly in the crash of 1929. These workers endured the most loss during the economic transition, making them readily visible as the forgotten ones. These photographs were disseminated through numerous publications, including national magazines and syndicated newspapers that made these images available to the public in great numbers.

In Chapter Three, I argue that New Deal relief programs for artists produced representations of a democratic cultural paradigm as FDR and his administration understood or desired it to be. Maybe the most obvious rhetorical argument of visual persuasion for a nation of “middle” class workers sharing a common culture can be found in public murals produced under government-sponsorship through the Works Progress Administration. These constructed forgotten ones characterized the successful collusion of classes and the values attributed to the ideal American. Thematic visual artworks created under government programs did much to form the concept of a unified nation of “common” men and women of all races and ethnicities with shared values, goals, and obligations for the good of a democratic society. Artists did so because they believed the rhetoric surrounding the common man image and produced allegories of worker images to fit the rhetoric.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I suggest that motion pictures offered their own uniquely constructed representation of the forgotten ones as members of the upper classes. Often the story line of a film revolved around persons from the upper class down on their luck but able to return to their former social status through recognition of their essential character and class. Many Depression era films included discovery and recognition as vital elements to the plot. In each situation a dis-empowered person moves from one social position to another of seemingly more power. Thus, filmgoers understood the link between recognition and discovery as one avenue to social identity and class mobility. One could by-pass the traditional concept of social mobility through hard work and suffering simply by being recognized or discovered as a “natural” or “deserving” person worthy of greater power. We find this most often in films based on the rags-to-riches myth which suggested that the “found” persons came from a lower social standing, but
through luck or destiny, “found” themselves as members of the upper-class. Being found or recognized assured one of not being forgotten. Another subtext existed in Hollywood productions as well, one that warned audiences not to forget the civic “duties” and opportunities for benevolence of the upper class. In this context, films portrayed upper-class privilege as a necessary partner to the lower classes, who would benefit from the power and influence of the privileged, thereby uniting them through a shared sense of duty, appreciation, and common values and goals, a rhetorical similarity which overlooked class disparities in favor of an ideological cultural belief in democracy, capitalism, and Christianity.

**A Last Note**

Clearly, there is no one history of the 1930s, and my contribution is only one of many possible interpretations on this subject. This study highlights some areas and raises questions about others which should engender further research on this topic.
Chapter 1: FDR and the Rhetorical Construction of the Common (Forgotten) Man

Roosevelt’s fireside chats were structured in both form and content by the new mode of publicness initiated by the culture industries in the 20th century. Roosevelt employed the idioms of mass culture to close the perceptual gap between him and his mass audience. As media events, the chats were useful in dramatizing a new symbolic geography of the American imagined community for the mass public, and thus in introducing to this public a set of new identities and practices appropriate to 20th-century mass politics.33
As David Ryfe noted above, Franklin D. Roosevelt's savvy at manipulating the culture industries for personal and public benefit constitutes one of his many political accomplishments. In this chapter, I will focus on the primary modes of communication FDR used to rhetorically construct a unified nation by manipulating the forgotten man trope into a representative national character – the common man. In addressing his imagined mass public through radio and on screen through newsreels, Roosevelt appealed to his audience by making them feel as though they were part of a community, something beyond their own localities, neighborhoods, families, or religious communities and into a much larger community of citizens sharing one culture, one nation, and one God. FDR's strategy took full advantage of the technological innovations of his time.

Radio became a formidable medium of communication in the 1930s, and subsequently one of the primary tools of cultural dissemination. As one of the "culture industries" cited by Adorno and Horkheimer, radio contributed to the standardization of an American character in much the same way other media communication forms did. Gathering around the radio to hear a comedy, drama, or presidential address were moments shared by people from all ages, races, classes, and genders. The potential for offering a diversity of opinions, languages, religious and cultural interests was severely limited both by technological capabilities and industry regulations. These limitations led to a standardization in programming that further homogenized American culture.

Not surprisingly, the impact of radio as a tool of cultural knowledge has been the topic of much scholarly attention, though few have focused on the subject of Franklin D. Roosevelt's use of radio as a tool for cultural persuasion or how his speeches affected cultural identity. Technology for broadcast radio was available over a decade before Roosevelt took office as President of the United States, but FDR is considered the first man in this position to fully realize the potential of new technologies in achieving political goals. Roosevelt made over 300 radio addresses and fireside chats, with the

34 Dixon Wecter. *The Age of the Great Depression 1929-1941* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 169. Radios were relatively cheap to purchase and by the mid-thirties, most areas of the country had access to electricity or battery-operated radios. Home consumption of electricity increased 63% nationwide from 1934-1942.
35 The importance of radio to people's lives in the 1930s should not be underestimated. Radio brought "culture" into the homes of all ages, classes and races. It provided news, entertainment, access to political leaders and celebrities at relatively little cost to the consumer.
knowledge that radio could reach across regional, racial, and class boundaries simultaneously. He also understood and benefited from the fact that his views would be heard without opposition from anyone else when he used radio to inform the nation of his plans for recovery, reform, and revitalization of the U.S. economy. FDR further understood the democratic appeal of radio to the public, and recognized the heightened degree of control he could have in shaping American opinion through this medium.36

Early radio promoters suggested that radio’s particular strength lay in its capacity to improve the quality of thinking among the masses by exposing millions of people to the finest intellects civilization had produced. Joy Elmer Morgan, editor of the Journal of the National Education Association and chairman of the National Committee on Education by Radio, believed that broadcasting’s benefits went beyond the elevation of individual taste because "it promised to engender a unified culture devoted to 'intelligent living.'"37 When Morgan saw the economic decline of the country he emphasized the desirability of a national culture even more. He used the vocabulary of New Deal rhetoric to call for "planning" and government regulation to achieve the “enlightenment” radio could advance. Yet, the influx of radio advertising overshadowed any prospects educational radio offered, and education soon took a back seat to the more profitable commercial forms of broadcasting.

By the end of the 1930s, educational programs and the university and church sponsors so prevalent in the twenties were gone. Chain-ownership had become the norm and controlled most radio stations.38 Furthermore, a study done by sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld in 1939 found that as one moved down the scale of what he termed “cultural levels,” based on either income or education, the amount of serious listening declined.39 Like public television in the latter part of the twentieth century, educational radio in the 1930s suffered from the competition offered by the entertainment value of commercial radio. However, the “educational” programs which focused on recipes,

39 Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Radio and the Printed Page (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), 21.
gardening, historical drama, and book reviews by well-known personalities, as well as the quiz shows, did enjoy a certain popularity and influence with listeners. Radio personalities had a lot of influence over listeners and often encouraged the pursuit of “cultured” entertainments such as reading novels. The emphasis on personality in the 1930s also contributed to new attitudes regarding culture as an attainable commodity. No longer was the emphasis so much on becoming a learned person as some form of moral duty or self-discipline, or even to train one’s mental powers. It was as Warren Susman posited, not about developing character, but about making oneself more interesting; about having “personality.” Radio supported the notion that culture was obtainable if one chose to pursue it as such. Perhaps the most famous radio personality of the 1930s was President Franklin Roosevelt. He understood the potential of radio as a tool of communication and used it as such with great finesse.

Michel Foucault has written that "[d]iscursive practices are not purely and simply modes of manufacture of discourse. They take shape in technical ensembles, in institutions, in behavioral schemes, in types of transmission and dissemination, in pedagogical forms that both impose and maintain them." Foucault has also argued that the truth of any discourse is far less important than its ability to create a an accepted and functional form of reality "to the exclusion of all other forms of discourse." Consequently, there can be no one media that links all ideas or events. FDR’s rhetoric alone did not persuade the populous to mold itself into the image of a “mono-class,” but his radio speeches set a certain "can-do" tone that many found inspirational. Leading the nation through one of the worst economic disasters in American history and into the Second World War, Roosevelt was both burdened and blessed by the many cultural changes and new technologies available during this chaotic and tumultuous period. Franklin Roosevelt seemed a man perfectly suited to his time and office. His mastery at merging his powerful language with the fashion of “the people” makes his presidency vitally important to understanding the use of cultural influences and technologies in shaping history.

---

40 Rubin, 5.
41 Susman, Culture as History, 165. Also see Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image, 45-76, for an excellent analysis of hero/celebrity worship.
Roosevelt's Rhetorical Mastery

Radio was a most effective tool for FDR because it allowed him direct access to more people. With an immediacy and emotion which could never be matched by the printed word, or even by newsreels run in the theaters, radio broadcasts of his fireside chats allowed Roosevelt to achieve a conversational intimacy that no other president has been able to reproduce. These live “chats” had the further advantage of allowing Roosevelt complete freedom to speak directly to his audience unhindered by media censorship. Radio gave him an advantage over those who opposed his policies and whose only recourse for expressing their opinions was through the traditional medium of print. Once his presentation was made, the press lacked any opportunity for immediate rebuttal and suffered the disadvantage of not being able to question his meanings or words.44

In Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Rhetorical Presidency, Halford Ryan analyzes FDR as a rhetorical president through his use of language, voice, and participation in the writing of his speeches. Ryan writes, “As a rhetorical president, Roosevelt exploited the technology of his time to its fullest potential” when he used the radio, newspapers, and motion picture newsreels to communicate his ideas to the American public.45 Roosevelt was always ebullient, confident in his delivery and infectious in his dynamism, as evinced by a 1940 New York Times report on a speech FDR gave in Philadelphia which stated, “The President was never in better form. With all the force of tonal inflection, irony and bitter humor, he revived his campaign technique of 1932 and 1936 and carried to a high pitch of enthusiasm the crowd which had gathered in the hope of hearing the type of talk he delivered.”46 (for audio examples of Roosevelt’s oratory go to http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/audio.html. You must use Realtime to hear recordings)

The concept of a rhetorical presidency is supported by the writings of scholars such as Richard E. Neustadt and Theodore Windt, who characterize this as “an institutional practice that has arisen within the presidency in the 20th century.”47 In Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership, Neustadt writes that “Presidential power

45 Ryan, 1.
46 as quoted in Ryan, 62.
47 Ryan, 2.
is the power to persuade,"48 which Windt then expands by arguing that, “[p]residential rhetoric is a study of how presidents gain, maintain, or lose support of the public. It is not a study of literary or rhetorical style. It is not an academic study of rhetorical techniques intended to refine rhetorical theory. It is a study of power, of the fundamental power in a democracy: public opinion and public support.”49 FDR’s mastery of rhetorical technique included persuasion, simplicity and vagueness, use of the vernacular, coupled with imagery drawn from popular culture. Additionally, FDR’s rhetoric was successful because he demonstrated awareness of the five arts or classical canons of rhetoric: First, FDR understood the speech invention process, as evinced by the suggestions he gave to his writers for ideas, themes, and guidelines. Second, he helped organize and rearrange materials in speeches for persuasive effect. Third, through his visual and aural recordings FDR paid considerable attention to the way he used language and his ability to coin memorable phrases and speak eloquent diction. Fourth, he paid attention to delivery and made sure that he was lively and showed vitality. Finally, while he did not memorize his speeches, FDR was able to deliver them almost flawlessly from the written page whether on the radio or at a podium.50

Halford Ryan has also observed that FDR had a unique rhetorical style in that he used language to confront problems head-on. He appeared to offer solutions to problems while in fact he actually suggested nothing of the sort. FDR typically spoke of problems from the standpoint of what he would not do, rather than what he was prepared to do. In fact, most often FDR’s statements centered on what the Republicans and the Hoover administration had done before him or what his opponents proposed to do in the present. Thus, Roosevelt made Republicans and the Hoover administration into scapegoats for everything wrong in the country. He blamed them for the trickle-down theory, rugged individualism, and government for the rich. He blamed the economic royalists for creating the Depression.51 This technique allowed Roosevelt to speak about issues directly while

50 Ryan, 6. More can be found on FDR’s use of the rhetorical canon in John Wilson and Carroll Arnold’s Public Speaking as a Liberal Art 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974). For other authors who have written about presidential rhetoric see Richard E. Neustadt, Theodore Windt, Beth Ingold, and Harry Bailey.  
51 Ryan, 52.
remaining vague about his own plans to resolve a situation. His arguments for solutions, then, remained nebulous, allowing his audience to interpret them in various ways. An example of this indistinct language can be seen in his July 1932 address to the Democratic National Convention, wherein he admonished the American people to share blame for the Depression:

Blame not Governments alone for this. Blame ourselves in equal share. Let us be frank in acknowledgement of the truth that many amongst us have made obeisance to Mammon, that the profits of speculation, the easy road without toil, have lured us from the old barricades. To return to higher standards we must abandon the false prophets and seek new leaders of our own choosing (7/2/32).52

John Wilson and Carroll Arnold have called FDR “one of the most successful political speakers in the history of the United States,” extolling his use of invention, arrangement, elocution, and delivery, as well as his remarkable vitality, which all contributed to his ability to articulate and persuade his audience.53 Certainly his election to four successive terms in office demonstrates the effectiveness of his expertise at public communication. In FDR’s public speeches and fireside radio addresses he had great opportunity to influence the American people with his rhetoric of unity and his conceptualization of American identity. His rhetoric had an enormous impact on the rhetorical formation of a middle-class identity because he spoke to American citizens as though they were all members of a team – each with a different but equally important position to play. His rhetoric thus neutralized tensions between the haves and have-nots partly by universalizing the classes. FDR repeatedly emphasized the common man, using a stratagem to unite the many disparate social groups and organizations fighting for agency during this period. In the process, he created greater unity from among the multitude of disparities causing racial, ethnic, gender, class, and regional struggles which threatened to unravel the country. FDR’s rhetoric of the common man contributed enormously to the establishment of an American identity which denied the reality of such disparities and differences in favor of a fictitious commonality.

**Symbols and Speechwriting**

---

52 Public speeches and radio addresses will be cited by date presented. All speeches can be found in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vols. 1-13 (New York: Random House, 1936-1950). Compiled and collected by Samuel I. Rosenman, 1950.

53 Wilson and Arnold, 99.
In researching Roosevelt's Rhetorical Presidency, Ryan paid considerable attention to the changes Roosevelt made to speeches written by his team of speechwriters. Comparing drafts of speeches proposed to Roosevelt with the recommendations made by FDR, Ryan suggests that FDR's personal views affected his speeches and addresses. Ryan found evidence that FDR took great care to excise language speechwriters thought elegant or tasteful but that Roosevelt thought inappropriate to a particular situation.\(^5^4\) Apparently FDR wanted to use language consistent with his view of the “average” American and form his own image (through language) relative to this image of the common man.\(^5^5\) Ryan concludes that FDR spent a noteworthy amount of time preparing his speeches because he knew how important they were to persuading and convincing people of his plans. He also understood the necessity of calming the fears and frustrations felt by his audience, so he imposed his own unique style upon the words he communicated to his audiences, and invested his personal image and strategy for leadership with the impromptu recitations he made while delivering a speech or address.\(^5^6\)

Norman Thomas, leader of the Socialist Party and presidential hopeful during the 1930s, suggested that the Russian Revolution had enormous appeal to American radicals and many liberals because it meant the overthrow of despotic autocracy in Europe. Thomas stated that “[The Revolution] spoke and acted in the name of the working-class whose triumph was bound to mean the ultimate triumph of justice and true democracy even if it had incidental evils…”\(^5^7\) Roosevelt knew he needed to satisfy the growing radical and intellectual interests in alternative forms of government. Given Roosevelt’s legacy of protective legislation for the common man, he found value in some aspects of the radicals’ arguments such as government’s responsibility to its citizens. Norman Thomas suggested that Roosevelt did this by “making ideas and proposals formerly called ‘socialist’ evident in his policies.” However, as Thomas further argued,

\(^{5^4}\) Ryan, 162. See also Boorstin, The Image, 21.

\(^{5^5}\) Gerard A. Hauser, Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 238.


only “in the Tennessee Valley Authority and in rural electrification did [FDR] seriously challenge and abridge along socialist lines the capitalist system of private ownership and operations for profit.” Nonetheless, Roosevelt learned that language and presentation were powerful tools in persuasively quelling any rumblings of revolution.

Roosevelt’s revisions to speeches may have been strongly influenced by public interests which he garnered from letters sent to the White House. The administration received between five and eight thousand letters daily, four times the amount of any other administration before or since. Rhetorical scholar Gerard Hauser found that Roosevelt actually read many of the letters sent to him, particularly those regarding his run for a fourth presidential term. A memo written by Ira R. T. Smith, chief presidential mail clerk, illustrates the attention Roosevelt paid to the amount of mail arriving at the White House. Smith states "[w]henever there was a decrease in the influx of letters we could expect to hear from him or one of his secretaries, who wanted to know what was the matter – was the President losing his grip on the public?" Roosevelt considered these letters, written by typical Americans, a reliable index of public sentiment. From these letters, Roosevelt learned about popular vernacular and cadence, social and economic conditions, and people’s experience with legislation and public policy, which he used in his speeches. Additionally, FDR employed poets, playwrights, and journalists among his corps of speechwriters, several of whom came from the motion picture industry and were as savvy about vernacular discourse in language and content as they were about public relations.

Clearly, Roosevelt surrounded himself with professionals adept at communicating through symbolic language. Cultural and social historian Warren Susman has argued that FDR demonstrated his awareness of the power of symbols from the beginning of his first administration. Susman concluded that “the New Deal, no matter its successes or failures, was a sociological and psychological triumph,” no doubt

58 Thomas, 111.
60 Hauser, 236.
61 as quoted in Boorstin, Hidden History, 145.
62 Hauser, 239.
63 Boorstin, The Image, 21.
due to FDR's mastery of communication tools and technology. Roosevelt's administration implemented national symbols such as the National Recovery Administration's (NRA) Blue Eagle bearing the slogan “We Do Our Part,” as well as the display of flags and numerous parades, all intended to unify the country. The Blue Eagle represented businesses with more than one employee who practiced the labor codes set forth by the newly formed NRA, such as a minimum wage, maximum number of work hours, and restrictions on child labor.

The repetition of such symbols in movies, photographs, radio “soaps,” advertising, comic strips and literature did much to create a cohesive sense of nationality. Roosevelt's understanding of the psychological import of symbols and language is again obvious from the revisions he made to his speeches. He chose language simple enough that most people could understand him. For instance, in 1936, a nine-year-old child from Kansas wrote FDR: “I heard your speech last night and it was a good one and I could understand it. My mother and father are for you because you are a good man.” Letters to FDR also indicate that people responded to his rhetoric because they heard what they wanted to hear. In a letter from a minister in Wisconsin, the writer complimented FDR by stating: “I shall take pleasure in casting my vote for you again to become our Commander-in-Chief in the great war in behalf of social justice and Christian citizenship and Peace.”

Letters from other folks demonstrate the sense of familiarity citizens felt with Roosevelt. For example, a letter from a woman in Lawndale, California, in 1934: "I am writing you this morning in all faiths, that if I can get word to you of our horrible plight you will not pass it by unnoticed." Another letter from an anonymous man in St. Louis ended by thanking FDR "in advance for any help, advice or information given me, I remain your humble servant." These letters reflect those who felt truly forgotten by their government and illustrate how Roosevelt's style and rhetorical mastery touched the hearts and minds of his public. The fact that FDR read many of these letters himself must have provided a sense of personal empowerment as well as confidence in knowing

---

64 Susman, *Culture as History*, 159.
65 As quoted in Ryan, 48.
66 Ryan, 49.
67 McElvaine, *Down and Out*, 57.
68 McElvaine, *Down and Out*, 56.
that his words and sentiments communicated sincerity, familiarity, and community to his constituents.

As Patricia Hill Collins notes in *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought*, “The way in which knowledge is created and validated has profound political and social implications since it is intrinsic to self-definition and to historical interpretation.”\(^69\) If one exchanges the word “power” for the word “knowledge” in this sentence, one gets the same result. To a great extent, knowledge is power, and access to either is fundamental to self-perception as well as to how individuals are perceived by society. Power is as much an abstract concept as is knowledge, and it can therefore be just as easily manipulated or constructed to suit a social or institutional purpose. In the case of New Deal rhetoric, power was an illusion created by FDR’s choice of language so that he could “manipulate” or construct the concept of a unified nation working as equal members of a team to return the country to economic stability. As members of a team, citizens could visualize themselves working toward common goals and sharing responsibility for achieving those goals. Subsequently, citizens could picture themselves united as a group – something Roosevelt encouraged through his use of symbolic language. Moreover, his popular radio addresses and formal speeches to the American public created the illusion that FDR was one with the “common folk” because he spoke to them like equals, deliberately addressing his audience as “my fellow citizens” or “my friends.” Use of such familiar language enabled Roosevelt to position himself as part of the team without relinquishing the power he held as team leader (7/2/32 & 7/24/33).\(^70\)

**Beginning With The Forgotten Man**

While a Presidential candidate in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered a speech on the economic crisis affecting the nation. Entitled "The Forgotten Man," this speech is a profound example of Roosevelt's rhetorical mastery in choosing symbolic language to create moving visual imagery through words. After comparing the present economic situation with that of the mobilization for the First World War, FDR stated:

> These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power, for plans like those of 1917 that

---


\(^{70}\) *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt.*
build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid (4/7/32).

Raymond Moley, who authored the speech, modeled it on William Graham Sumner's famous essay "The Forgotten Man." But whereas Sumner used his essay to discuss the concept of the average man who worked for a living, Moley used the term to encompass everyone who felt wronged by the Depression. FDR's pledge to solve the economic crisis "from the bottom to top and not from the top to bottom" resonated well with the considerable number of down-and-out listeners who felt ignored by their government. Having set the tone for a battle between rich and poor, conservative and liberal, the trope soon became part of Roosevelt's popular discourse regarding social order and class distinctions. With unprecedented numbers of unemployed workers feeling abandoned and forgotten, the President managed to articulate the anger and despair felt by so many, when he made reference to the forgotten man.

Though the phrase "forgotten man" appeared only once in the speech, the implication it represented for "every man" captured the attention of listeners from all walks of life, but particularly members of the working classes and those who felt disempowered on the basis of gender, race or ethnicity. The significance of Roosevelt's use of this phrase lies in the complexity of meaning it held for so many at that time. Given the tensions of urbanization, racial and immigrant migrations, feminism, and labor unrest simmering throughout the first two decades of the century, the 1930s represent a moment of confrontation. Had the "Crash of '29" not occurred, the rising unrest among these groups might have slowly found resolution in other ways, but the resounding "crash" of the economy forced the nation to acknowledge, if not confront, its challenges.

Since labor is intrinsically part of the economy and lay at the core of tensions between the races, classes, genders, and industrial versus agrarian lifestyles, mythology centering on work and workers became the primary focus of Roosevelt's New Deal ideology. Heeding Sumner's argument that "the worker" was too often a forgotten man, Roosevelt made sure that his attention centered firmly on the value of work and the worker. The weight of FDR's rhetoric in this regard lay in the challenge of appealing to

---

workers from varying classes and professions, unlike Sumner whose image was clearly formed as a blue-collar worker. Because the distinctions between blue-collar and white-collar classes were blurred by consumption habits and product standardization, Roosevelt's worker did not exist in the same realm as had Sumner's. Conscious or not of that distinction, FDR chose to use the phrase "forgotten man" as a signifier for worker, but he soon transferred that signification to the phrase "common man," suggesting an image of one-ness and unity, thereby acknowledging the complex merging of classes and ethnic and racial groups into one unified coalition against economic hardship.

One of the primary results of FDR's emphasis on the commonality of Americans was the image he presented of American democracy which placed the majority of citizens in one class: the middle. He did this by separating himself (and the American people) into one group against the opposition: the wealthy, profiting class. The underclass was, for the most part, forgotten, except when it suited the needs of the administration or reform-minded politicians and activists to include them into the larger whole. He had also made this part of the Forgotten Man speech: "I cannot escape the conclusion that one of the essential parts of a national program of restoration must be to restore purchasing power to the farming half of the country. Without this the wheels of railroads and of factories will not turn" (4/7/32).

Understanding the tensions regarding labor issues, regionalism, nativism, and so on, the President was careful about how he linked rural and urban workers, regional identities and racial groups in his speeches. Use of the common man metaphor was a clever way of unifying these groups into a nation of like-minded citizens working for the shared rewards of capitalism and democracy. When Roosevelt spoke of the common man, he made specific references to mythical aspects of the American character, such as the self-reliant individual and the pioneer spirit which had settled the untamed West. In a speech in October, 1940, FDR said:

The pioneers survived by fighting their own fight and by standing together as one man in the face of danger. If we, their descendants, are to meet the dangers that threaten us, we too must be ready to fight our own fight and stand together as one man. In hours of peril the frontiersmen, whatever their personal likes or dislikes, whatever their personal differences of opinion, gathered together in absolute unity for defense. We, in this hour, must have and will have absolute national unity for total defense (10/2/40).
Inclusive references such as this deliberately ignored the many diverse nationalities and heritages of new Americans, thereby rhetorically encouraging immigrants to ignore their own heritages and assimilate to Americanism. Immigrants must have felt, with just cause, like the quintessential forgotten ones, and this strangely unified them with native-born Americans, many of whom also felt forgotten in the tumult of changes occurring during the interwar period. FDR’s genius in remaining nebulous in his definition of the forgotten man bore fruit by allowing all Americans, regardless of class, race, or gender status, to claim the characterization as their own.

**From Forgotten to Common**

When audiences heard FDR speak of the common man, did they picture themselves in that image? I contend that this concept was established as the “ideal” representation of the American character in a deliberate attempt to maintain social order and control. Why would Roosevelt argue that a “common” person, one neither too intelligent, nor too courageous, too ambitious, etc., would be an ideal type rather than a more exceptional person (Einstein for example), if not for some desire to pacify social tensions? After all, what FDR most needed to prevent was revolution or another kind of civil uprising. It had become obvious through examples abroad that the maintenance of power would be impossible if the minimal needs of the under classes and disenfranchised were not addressed. Revolutions brought on by disparity between the haves and have-nots had recently occurred in Mexico and Russia, so American politicians remained well aware of the possible dangers of a neglected underclass.

FDR’s rhetoric, then, might be seen as a form of psychological police control in which he set up the boundaries of what and who is good, and identified them as “common.” Normalizing this image in political discourses through his choice of rhetoric, he suggested that those exhibiting common characteristics would prosper and grow as a result. It became clear, then, that the common man or woman would ideally follow FDR’s strategy for economic recovery and social unity. Those who did not would only exacerbate the current situation and cause ruin to all. But for all those unable or unwilling to identify with the ideal image of the common ones, the concept of the forgotten man was an image with which they could more easily identify.

The forgotten man trope became a semiotic code for the ideal American: democratic, capitalist, religious, moral, innocent, youthful, strong, and courageous --
qualities mythologized via cultural idols such as pioneers and cowboys. The forgotten man represented the potential American, one who could be molded into the ideal just as a raw material such as iron ore can potentially become a product of great value. By surrendering to his potential, the forgotten man could become one of the team members of whom Roosevelt spoke—a common man. He was, for all intents and purposes, raw material potentially transformed into the ideal American.

**The Essential American**

One necessary element of constructing the prototypical image of the “average” American centered on the *essence* of character. The first manifestations of an essential Americanism may be traced to the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, a French diplomat who first praised the merits of American democracy and the mutable possibilities of its social structure during his tour of the states in the 1830s. In his book *Democracy in America*, first published in English in 1835, de Tocqueville wrote about the lack of aristocracy and classism in the U.S., citing it as a truly unique and original country. De Tocqueville’s book received enormous acclaim in Europe and influenced many important political leaders of the 19th century. Since that time, those outside of the U.S. have perceived it as having a social paradigm unique in the history of the western world, i.e. American exceptionalism. What appeared exceptional to those outside the U.S. was the ostensibly lax social stratification. Though disparity between the wealthy and the poor becomes apparent to all who live in or visit the U.S. now, the belief that all Americans have an opportunity to move into any social class is commonly held by foreigners and Americans alike, suggesting that the U.S. possesses a mutable social paradigm. De Tocqueville’s concept of American society as mutable was tied to his observations about American character, thus linking the idea of social status to that of one’s essential being. Essentialism was, in fact, a popular topic in late 19th century public discourse as evidenced by attention given to Darwinian logic and an organized eugenics movement.

Questions regarding one’s inherent nature re-surfaced during the 1930s as social and economic tensions increased, renewing the quest to define a fundamental American character. Reviving and revising long established myths of the American character became the premise of New Deal cultural hegemony. As Barthes has established, the function of myth is to erase one’s previous history of individual or cultural identity. Barthes tells us that myth transforms history into nature by naturalizing man-made
events and signs. In both the visual and verbal rhetoric of FDR’s administration, the irresponsibility of man is erased by denying the history of bad agrarian practices, poor economic policies, and failed conquests made by the bourgeoisie in power prior to the Depression. The images and history created by FDR and his administration transformed the previous version of history (reality) into one celebrating industrial progress and ingenuity. These myths soon became equivalent to statements of fact because they were linked to FDR’s concept of the essential American.

The rhetoric of essentialism aided the Roosevelt administration in rebuilding the capitalistic paradigm of democracy as Americans wanted it to be. This characterization contains a strong element of Christian morality, implied in scenes of fertile land, lush forests, clean air, majestic mountains – in short, God’s creation and God’s country, with the implication that those privileged to live here are somehow chosen people. By building on pre-established principles of freedom, individualism and morality, the administration instilled a sense of order in the country. In this way it took advantage of a pivotal point in nationalism in the 1930s, the protagonist role of the state as the agent of profound hegemony. Economic crisis across the country, along with the exoduses of workers from the south to the north, from the country to the city, and the unrest of industrial workers, demanded that the state intervene in society in ways it never had before. The state directed the rules of nationhood and monopolized the historical sentiments and national heritage of art and culture, especially those owned and operated by the state.

FDR’s rhetoric helped create an illusion that Americans were all essentially the same, including blacks, immigrants, and those in the lower socio-economic classes. The illusion of a natural essence of Americanism inspired artists and photographers working in government-sponsored relief programs to form a tangible image of quintessential Americanism. This concrete image was intricately woven of myths derived from American history. The complexity of signification in these images highlight the importance of visual forms of communication in aiding Roosevelt’s political agenda and New Deal policies. The development of visual iconography consistent with Roosevelt’s presidency is also of note since it represents a moment when, as historian Daniel J. Boorstin argued, “[n]ow the language of images is everywhere. . . it has displaced the

---

language of ideals." In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Boorstin linked the fact that if images could sell things such as clothes, cars, Presidents, and even religion, why could it not also sell "the American Way of Life"? It was, as Boorstin claimed, a result of the Graphic Revolution that images had replaced abstract ideals in defining cultural values. Whereas abstract concepts such as honesty, integrity, liberty, freedom, and democracy once seemed clearly comprehensible in speech and print, reliance on visual symbols assumed much greater importance once images could be used to educate, explain, and most significantly, sell, ideas and values to the masses. One such notion was that of the essential American.

Marketing strategies used to sell commodity items could also function as rhetorical techniques to sell ideas. The Graphic Revolution thus made it possible to reach large numbers of people with easily grasped pictorial forms of communication while simultaneously making it easier to manipulate the meaning and complexity of that symbolic language. Apparently, Roosevelt understood the significance of such marketing strategies and employed them to create a rhetorical image of the quintessential American. No doubt the essentialist myths also benefited the concept of a middle-class bourgeoisie. As Barthes writes in *Mythologies*, "It is through their rhetoric that bourgeois myths outline the general prospect of this *pseudo-physis* which defines the dream of the contemporary bourgeois world" Values of the bourgeoisie pervade the laws of the land so that white-collar class values seem normal and natural. But in order to make that happen they had first to be absorbed into the political and social discourses. FDR used myth, as Barthes described it, to create an image of America and Americans as democratic. He de-politicized his speech by bringing it down to the level of coach, minister, parent, and benevolent leader, but his ultimate goal was to re-instate capitalism itself as an ideology that works well within the parallel ideology of democracy.

If we consider discourses about two subjects most important to FDR's rhetoric, democracy and capitalism, as the search for knowledge and truth, we must determine how those truths were used in cultural relations. Both ideologies are ordered in a similar way, with the vast majority of powerless units working under the concentrated power of a

---

75 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 150.
76 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 140.
very few. Roosevelt’s rhetoric about democracy contributed to a discourse centered on the purported opportunity for all citizens to participate equally and to share in the rewards of power. Of course, students of American history know that the founding fathers of American democracy hardly ever intended for the concept of all citizens to include those of color, those without property, or women. Roosevelt faced difficulty in establishing this revised concept of a more universal or inclusive democracy. In capitalism, as in a democracy, each level works to support the level above it. Therefore, a capitalistic society’s middle class cannot exist without a top and bottom class. Moreover, emphasis on equality in power and status does not merge well with the fundamental structures of capitalism, which depends on the power of a few and the vulnerability of many. To get around this inherent contradiction, Roosevelt’s rhetoric of democracy suggested a “classless” (or shall we say mono-class) community and economic structure. FDR contributed to a national identity which equated democracy and capitalism with a “classless” society. Roosevelt’s rhetorical depiction of a quintessential American did much to form a union among many divergent groups of citizens, particularly important when World War II demanded national unity. The words he chose, the media he used, and the visual images he created of himself and a fictitious American citizen were vital to the formation of national identity. Note, for example, the kinds of visual images Roosevelt allowed to be shown of himself. FDR understood the value of photographs depicting him surrounded by people (voters) from a variety of professions. FDR always appeared comfortable in these situations. His appearance enhanced his efforts to be seen as a common man, a member of the people, and for the people.

(Fig. 3) FDR in Shenandoah Valley, VA, 1933 and FDR on U.S.S. Indianapolis in Trinidad, 1936.
Roosevelt's discourse relied heavily on the concept of democracy and not on the experience of democracy as it had been practiced in a capitalist economy. He attempted to construct a new form of knowledge or truth which he hoped would restore stability to an otherwise chaotic economic and social reality. Of course, the image that FDR created in his rhetoric relied heavily on the social discourse of American character and American history, which looked suspiciously like that of white Protestant American-born men who ran the country. With WASP ideals considered the norm and accepted as a form of truth, FDR relied on these ideals as representative of the "common" American. His rhetoric relied heavily on the Jeffersonian image of Americans as pioneers, individualists, and self-reliant agrarians coupled with that of Jacksonian democratic humanism, strong leadership, and Puritan ethics of hard work, responsibility, and justice. Visual media communicated the image of the common man, as characterized by FDR, providing a tangible representation of his vague definition. Citizens who felt lost and overlooked by their government, however, found even more potent the image of the forgotten man. Just as the innocuous phrase “new deal” had captured the attention of journalists and political pundits in Roosevelt’s first inaugural speech, so too did

---

interpretations of the forgotten man/common man become representative of FDR’s abstract audience.

**Class and Classlessness**

Becoming a common man signified entitlement to all that America was and could be. It meant that one held the essential characteristics, as defined by Roosevelt and in popular media, needed to claim Americanism as an identity. WASP ideals were solidified in these messages and FDR’s common man motif merely supported the trend toward standardizing the WASP ideal. Tangible forms of the common man could be found in print and film medias where WASP characteristics were naturalized into the myth of Americanism. Roosevelt’s rhetorical image of the common man remained nebulous enough that it could be made visible in various forms, but the most obvious image was the vision of a worker from either the blue-collar industrial class, or a lower-level white-collar worker; seldom the image of one in the profiteer class. The forgotten man image was linked to agricultural workers, specifically in the South and Midwest, but the implication was that as workers, these rural folk were equal members of the unified team FDR called common Americans. After all, it was the working classes that FDR most wanted to calm and control, although it was not the under-classes that could ultimately aid Roosevelt in his efforts toward recovery and reform.

Hence, Roosevelt may have demeaned his opponents in public, but privately he understood the need for government and business (the profiting class) to work cooperatively if they wished to restore the economy to a successful paradigm of capitalism. He understood the profiting class’s dependence on the class of laborers. For example, the upper (non-worker) classes were not shown in WPA artworks because they did not contribute to the process or production of capital and were therefore not of value in restoring a capitalist economy. In many speeches FDR linked the economics of capitalism with the ideals of democracy without ever discussing the conflicts inherent in a union of the two systems. Democracy, as Roosevelt defined it, meant equal opportunity for all citizens to the rights of liberty, life, and the pursuit of happiness. Capitalism depends on a mass of workers who produce goods for circulation in the economy. Workers do not profit from their labor in a capitalistic system; only a select few profit and they are not the ones who do the actual labor.

Positive images of the wealthy or profiting class would have been antithetical to FDR’s goal: creating unity and restoring harmony to the public order, but with the
addition of greater control over those areas most vulnerable to economic crisis. Roosevelt needed to convince workers of their value by honoring them as the heart and soul of the country, which indeed they represented. Giving workers “visual” power did not have to translate to “real” or physical power. But the actual fact of their necessity to the structure of capitalism would have given them tremendous power if only they had understood it, especially where strikes and labor demands were concerned. Roosevelt did, however, confront the economic disparities between Americans early on in his presidency, and made it a theme that ran continuously throughout his thirteen-year tenure as president. In a 1936 speech FDR said:

Our country is indeed passing though a period which is urgently in need of ardent protectors of the rights of the common man. Mechanization of industry and mass production have put unparalleled power in the hands of the few. No small part of our problem today is to bring the fruits of this mechanization and mass production to the people as a whole(6/10/36).

In another speech delivered just one year later, FDR spoke of work as a fundamental privilege of democracy, making work a right of the people. He said:

The inherent right to work is one of the elemental privileges of a free people. Continued failure to achieve that right and privilege by anyone who wants to work and needs work is a challenge to our civilization and to our security (11/14/37).

FDR deliberately sought to conceal American class differences early in his second term and unify all classes in the name of democracy. In a 1936 speech Roosevelt spoke directly about class consciousness. These lines clearly allude to the fear of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. FDR wanted to make it clear that the U.S. differed from either of those European nations. Therefore, he said, the U.S. would not and could not suffer the same fate. Once again, it was a strategy of defining the American people (and himself) in terms of everything they were not, thus allowing the people to form their own vague, but oppositional, self-image. He had already created the common man/forgotten man image in just such a fashion. By not defining exactly whom he meant by the common man, he allowed all members of the public to formulate themselves in the image of the average person by imagining the qualities of someone
who they were *not*: rich, greedy, or selfish. Thus, FDR’s rhetorical common man meant anyone other than his Republican opponents:

In this country we insist, as an essential of the American way of life, that the employer-employee relationship should be one between free men and equals. We refuse to regard those who work with hand or brain as different from or inferior to those who live from their property. We insist that labor is entitled to as much respect as property. . . . The average man must have that twofold opportunity if we are to avoid the growth of a class-conscious society . . . (9/6/36).

Continuing to address the issues of class separation, FDR then alluded to what many in the U.S. most feared (particularly those opposed to FDR, the New Deal, and communism).

There are those who . . . would try to refuse the worker any effective power to bargain collectively, to earn a decent livelihood and to acquire security. It is those shortsighted ones, not labor, who threaten this country with that class dissension which in other countries has led to dictatorship and the establishment of fear and hatred as the dominant emotions in human life. . . (9/6/36).

By 1938 FDR was again addressing the problems of classism in the U.S., though he did not dare go so far as to suggest an equality of all workers, which would sound too “communist” to his opponents. He also did not want to bring attention to Huey Long’s cry for re-distribution of wealth. Thus, he created an image of American oneness to appease those who were calling for a re-evaluation and re-ordering of the basic tenets of democracy and capitalism. He said:

America has always had – and America still has – a small minority who assume that there are not enough good things to go around to give that minority all that it wants and at the same time to give the rest of America—the overwhelming majority of America – a humane and modern standard of living (9/5/38).

Earlier that same year, Roosevelt had stated the need for Americans to unify as one group or one class without special privileges for a few. He again appealed to the working classes as he saw them, particularly middle managers and small shopkeepers:

[T]he continuation of the American system calls for the elimination of special privilege, the dissemination of the whole of the truth, and participation in prosperity by the
people at the bottom of the ladder, as well as those in the middle and at the top. . . (3/23/38).

In statements made in 1940, FDR again returned to issues of class consciousness in several speeches. For example:

The sense of human decency is happily confined to no group or class. . . [T]his urge of humanity can by no means be labeled a war of class against class. It is rather a war against poverty and suffering and ill health and insecurity, a war in which all classes are joining in the interest of a sound and enduring democracy (7/19/40).

Later in 1940, Roosevelt returns to the theme of class unity and this time makes it a matter of national concern for the success of a democratic society:

We understand the philosophy of those who offer resistance, of those who conduct a counter offensive against the American people’s march of social progress. It is not an opposition which comes necessarily from wickedness – it is an opposition that comes from subconscious resistance to any measure that disturbs the position of privilege . . . if private opportunity is to remain safe, average men and women must be able to have it as part of their own individual satisfaction in life and their own stake in democracy (11/1/40).

FDR had a very clear view of the necessity of having a class of workers to make capitalism work. He spoke frequently about the value of workers to society and understood the psychological need to elevate their contributions, not only to build self-esteem, but also to assure their willingness to participate in the country's capitalist economy.

In FDR’s speeches, he typically remained vague about what he promised to do for the American people. Roosevelt made an effort to say something pleasing to everyone, as evidenced in speeches designed specifically to appeal to immigrant populations. FDR walked a fine line between various immigrant groups' sensitivities to any infraction of their place as Americans. For example, in an attempt to smooth over comments he made about Mussolini and regain the favor of Italian Americans, FDR said in a June 1940 speech at Charlottesville, Virginia:

It is natural that all American citizens from the many nations of the Old World should kindly remember the old lands where their ancestors lived . . . . But in every single one of the American Republics, the first and final
allegiance, the first and final loyalty of these citizens . . . is to the Republic in which they live and move and have their being. . . . 78

It was important for the nation that FDR as a leader unite the many and varied immigrant groups. He had to deal with their lingering allegiances or conflicts with their European homelands, such as Irish Anglophobia, Italian-American anger over the commentary on Mussolini, and the isolationist sentiments of many Catholics. 79

The necessity to calm immigrant tensions became particularly important as anxiety mounted about war in Europe, with other domestic tensions regarding labor and race lingering as well. Seeking to keep them all in check, FDR used his rhetoric of the “common-man” to suggest that all American citizens have equal opportunities. He promoted this belief in a fireside chat on October 5, 1944, when he encouraged his audience to register to vote, by saying that voting should “be open to our citizens irrespective of race, color, or creed – without tax or artificial restriction of any kind. The sooner we go to that basis of political equality, the better it will be for the country as a whole.” 80 When one considers that the Roosevelt administration did little to create legislation ensuring those voting rights and opportunities for all, his strategic use of rhetoric to appease the disenfranchised becomes clear.

In 1940 Roosevelt again referred to the rights of citizens in what he called a “healthy” society. The following is an excerpt from a speech wherein Roosevelt established his paradigm of the healthy society:

> Of course we shall continue to strengthen all the dynamic reforms in our social and economic life; to keep the processes of democracy side by side with the necessities and possibilities of modern industrial production, --to use them, however, not for the enjoyment of the few but for the welfare of all (italics mine). For there lies the road to democracy that is strong.
> Of course we intend to continue to build up the bodies and the minds of the men, women and children of the Nation -- through democratic education and a democratic program for health.
> For there lies the road to democracy that is strong.

78 Ryan, 55.
80 Ryan, 66.
Of course we intend to continue to build up the bodies and the morale of this country, not as blind obedience to some leader, but as the expression of confidence in the deeply ethical principles upon which this Nation and its democracy were founded.
For there lies the road to democracy that is strong . . .
(11/2/40).

In the passages that followed FDR defined the way he saw Americans and the common man and woman: religious, having good will, simple, plain, hard-working and pioneering. He spoke of how Americans helped one another “conquer” the west, placing emphasis on unity and how people worked together on achieving goals for the good of all. There was, however, a marked lack of acknowledgement of racial, gender, ethnic, and religious tensions in many of Roosevelt’s speeches, since such references to such diversity would have weakened his argument for a unified nation of equal citizens and equal opportunity.

Roosevelt found numerous ways, both in language and deed, to level the playing field between the profiting and working classes. One way FDR rhetorically “leveled” his own position of power was to be “at one” with the common folk by using sports analogies. A sport as American as baseball equalizes social classes since all observers can understand and identify with the players. Assimilation through sports has also been a traditional way for immigrants to enter into mainstream American culture. In his radio address of May 7, 1933, FDR explained the various laws and measures being considered by Congress as part of his New Deal strategy. He said, “I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat. What I seek is the highest possible batting average, not only for myself but for the team.”

FDR’s emphasis on team efforts and the concept of commonality were used frequently to construct his own similarity with the public and to unify the masses by emphasizing their shared knowledge and cultural goals. For example, in another 1933 radio address regarding the National Recovery Administration (NRA), FDR stated,

While we are making this great common effort there should be no discord and dispute. This is no time to cavil or to question the standard set by this universal agreement. It is time for patience and understanding and cooperation . . . I

---

do have faith, and retain faith, in the strength of common purpose, and in the strength of unified action taken by the American people. . . .That is why I am asking the employers of the Nation to sign this common covenant with me – to sign it in the name of patriotism and humanity. That is why I am asking the workers to go along with us in a spirit of understanding and of helpfulness (7/24/33).

FDR tried to unite disparate and antithetical groups by making them appear one and the same. He equalized the ability of employer and worker to act out of patriotism and humanity, and united them in the shared effort of teamwork. While empowering them toward a common goal, he also made it clear that employers must restrict the power they possess if they are to act humanely. Since workers have less power, he asserted employers must be understanding and meet on common ground toward the goal of unification.

Besides sports and teamwork analogies, FDR used the metaphor of family and the household to further identify himself with the average American. In one instance, he said, "[W]e address ourselves to putting our own national house in order." He spoke of the good neighbor who "resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others…" (3/4/33). He appealed to the nation as a family or community of neighbors by making them all equally responsible for achieving a desired goal. In a 1933 Fireside Chat, he spoke of "everybody doing things together…," suggesting that " . . .[I]t goes back to the basic idea of society and of the nation itself that people acting in a group can accomplish things which no individual acting alone could even hope to bring about" (7/24/33).

But FDR never implied that all members of the team or family would reap equal rewards of power or prosperity. Workers still labored for the benefit of the profiting minority. In fact, FDR could only offer a psychological level of power to American workers by making them “feel” empowered. He elevated their contributions to the national well-being by describing them as an integral part of the solution to the economic crisis. The image FDR constructed to represent the ideal, helpful and cooperative citizen was that of the “common man.”

FDR also used religious metaphors to play upon the moral stock of Americans. One example of this strategy can be seen in Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Address of March 4, 1933. In this speech he used a scapegoating technique to maneuver the anxiety of the
American people from themselves to the bankers and Republicans. He did so by drawing an analogy between the bankers and the moneychangers whom Christ chased from the Temple. This comparison appealed to the American people because it placed the situation in a religious context which they understood. Roosevelt thus became the virtual savior to his people just as Christ had been for his. In associating the Biblical moneychangers with the Hoover administration, and the Republicans, FDR set the course for his stand against the opposition. Later in the speech Roosevelt again associated Republicans with moneychangers:

Yes, the money-changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. . . . Practices of the unscrupulous money-changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men (First Inaugural Address, 3/4/33).

In addition to religious, moral, familial and sporting metaphors, FDR often used military language and metaphor to place himself in the roles of both a servant to the people and a strong fighter. In his June 27, 1936, Democratic National Convention acceptance speech in Philadelphia, Roosevelt declared war on his opponents. He said, "We are fighting to save a great and precious form of government for ourselves. Re-enlist with me in that war. I accept the commission you have tendered me. I join with you. I am enlisted for the duration of the war." This kind of military discourse fueled the black and white mentality of “us” versus “them.” Many forms of popular entertainment used the dichotomy of good guys against bad guys. FDR only enhanced this kind of thinking by setting himself up as a man of the people against the economic “royalists” who sought to exploit the common folk.

Military metaphors also worked well for Roosevelt when he knew that he would need mass support for New Deal programs. As William Leuchtenburg has argued, "President Roosevelt sought to restore national confidence by evoking the mood of wartime." Roosevelt used these metaphors wisely to suggest the seriousness with which he and the American people needed to think and react to the economic crisis in their midst. He positioned himself as leader of the army, to be followed into the battle.

---

62 Ryan, 79.
He also used military metaphors to evoke a sense of duty and discipline with communal values as the rationale and goal of his leadership. As leader of a symbolic “war” against the Depression, his use of rhetoric worked well for the occasion. It also helped him manipulate Congress into an either/or situation. He essentially said, “You’re either with me (us), or you’re against me (and the American people).”

FDR understood the need to link himself with the worker while simultaneously tapping into a modernist discourse centered on technology. His language often reflected the growing dominance of the “machine culture” by emulating speed, efficiency, simplicity and productivity. Roosevelt used language to imply that the government was a well-tuned machine. For example, in a Fireside Chat on the banking crisis, he said, “We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system…” (3/12/33). He made a similar analogy in his 1932 speech before the National Democratic Convention when he equated government with the progress and efficiency of machinery, saying “we should set in motion at once, tonight, my friends, the necessary machinery for an adequate presentation of the issues to the electorate of the nation” (Chicago, 7/2/32). In this speech, Roosevelt reached out to the three groups of people he characterized as those hit hardest by the Depression: one group dependent on industry, another dependent on agriculture, and “the people who are called ‘small investors and depositors.’” “What is the measure of the security of each of those groups?” asked Roosevelt. “We know well that in our complicated, interrelated credit structure if any one of these credit groups collapses they may all collapse. Danger to one is danger to all” (7/2/32). FDR consistently emphasized shared responsibility and shared rewards in his rhetoric regarding the economy. And even though he often acknowledged the separation of income classes, by property in the above case, he continued to universalize the classes into one characterization by using the terms “common man” and “forgotten man” interchangeably.

**Summary**

Roosevelt borrowed a phrase already in the cultural lexicon and made it relevant to his time. The forgotten man trope signified the working man who embodied all that American mythology professed: self-reliance, Christian morality, a pioneering spirit, and a belief in equality among men. Though William Graham Sumner’s use of the phrase in the mid 19th century specifically referred to blue-collar and agrarian labor, Roosevelt’s rhetorical savvy enlarged the significations associated with this phrase to encompass all workers, rural and urban, black and white, immigrant and native-born, blue and white-
collar, who suffered from economic upheaval during the tumultuous 1930s. He also used his mastery of persuasion and rhetorical technique to establish unity through commonness by denying his own upper-class status.

As a liberal aristocrat whose roots lay in agrarian rather than industrial America, Roosevelt followed in the tradition of civic leaders before him, such as Thomas Jefferson, who joined public service as a form of duty and concern for those less fortunate. But FDR was also a brilliant politician whose sense of timing and intuition far surpassed his sense of vision for the country. FDR denied his own aristocratic status in appealing to his constituents, making himself part of each local community, rather than a distant ruler removed from the struggles felt by people across the nation. As president, FDR held a position of prestige, opportunity, and access, and he knew he held an influential role in reforming the battered self-image of the nation under his leadership. It was, after all, his task to unite the citizenry in one direction so as to restore the country to economic stability, passive social organization, and positive views of the future. To do so, Roosevelt promised a "New Deal" for the country which reiterated the basic tenets of democracy: the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

FDR's discussion of the common man/woman centered, however, on the image of the middle class, not the image of the poor tenant farmers in FSA photographs. He did not speak of the rural poor or poor immigrants living in urban centers as the common man. The middle-class image was meant to lie between those of the extremely rich and the urban poor; those who were considered (and constructed) to be the deserving poor because they were white industrial or agricultural workers. FDR also failed to include Blacks, Native Americans, young single working women or older women who had never married, and Chinese and Mexican migrant workers of the west and southwest in the common man scenario. Images of workers in murals, sculptures, and photos clearly expressed the idea that the deserving poor were people who had no power, yet were important for their symbolic presence as the “strength” and “backbone” of America. Unfortunately, they were only strong in numbers, and therefore necessary to make capitalism work.

Though many of FDR’s speeches produced important and profound phrases, the trope of the forgotten man seemed to resonate most clearly with the American public. The forgotten man functioned as a marker for FDR’s common man bringing those who felt most vulnerable and forgotten by the economic instability and changing nature of the
economy and lifestyles, into a unified group of American citizens. In the following chapters I argue that this trope became an identity claimed by Americans from all classes, not just the ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed. Interpretations of the forgotten man image appeared in numerous forms of popular rhetorical discourses which, taken as a whole, contributed to the mono-class “average” American character, as did Roosevelt’s rhetoric of the common man.

Finally, FDR’s rhetoric alone could not have persuaded the country to mold itself into the image of a “mono-class” of “middle” Americans by itself, but his comprehension of the working democratic society coupled with references drawn from popular culture, proved highly persuasive in communicating his desires to “the people” of the United States.
Chapter 2: Constructing a Visual Rhetoric of the Forgotten Man in Photographs

Images have become our true sex object, the object of our desire. . . It is this promiscuity and the ubiquity of images, this vile contamination of things by images which are the fatal characteristics of our culture. And this knows no bounds, because . . . images cannot be prevented from proliferating indefinitely (Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication).

Much of our cultural memory of the Depression has been formed through photographs taken for the History Section of the Resettlement Administration (RA) from 1935 to 1937, later known as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) from 1937 to 1942.84 The Office of War Information (OWI) followed the RA/FSA in 1942 and 1943, but its emphasis was clearly focused on the war and presenting a positive image of domestic strength and endurance. Photographs produced by each of these agencies, however, exist as cultural texts whose legacy is embedded in twentieth century American identity. The significance, as well as the paradoxical meanings of these photographs, lies in their continuous repetition as documents of American character and

---

84 FSA photographers produced 66,000 black and white prints, 122,000 negatives, and approximately 650 color transparencies as noted in B. I. Bustard, A New Deal for the Arts (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1997), 11.
national identity. Hence, the impact they have had on history, political and legislative policy, aesthetic critiques, and cultural memory can only be described as profound.

Writer James Agee once described the camera as “the central instrument” of the 1930s.85 We might assume that Agee used the term "instrument" as a synonym for "tool," but the importance of RA/FSA/OWI photographs was much more than that of a technological tool; they were an instrument of New Deal ideology that had far greater impact on Americans than did most other forms of national communication. No other visual texts have done as much to solidify images of poverty, despair, and what came to be recognized as the forgotten man, as have the photographs shot for the History Section files of the U.S. government. Nor has any other set of such a relatively limited number of visual texts transformed the myths of poverty, prosperity, democracy, and the subjectivity of social class in American culture, as did the photographs of RA/FSA and OWI photographers in the 1930s and early 1940s. Most of all, we should not forget that these photographs also functioned as a form of public and State surveillance. As such, these "documents" contributed to the maintenance of oppression and the existing social paradigm.

This chapter examines the role of photography in shaping the visual rhetoric of Roosevelt's forgotten man through RA/FSA photographs. The myth of the forgotten man was essentially a rhetorical appeal to those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. In the April 1932 “Forgotten Man” speech, Franklin Roosevelt addressed the growing agitation of labor leaders as well as the burgeoning radical movements that threatened to disrupt the existing orders of democracy and capitalism. As a result of this speech, conceptions of the forgotten man shaped the mythic image of people down-on-their-luck, which became an effective rhetorical appeal to the white-collar class of workers who saw the suffering of others and felt fortunate not to have it "that bad." Photographs also served to unify blue and white-collar workers, themselves in a desperate state of economic instability, with workers across the country. North, South, East and West, urban and rural workers felt unified by a shared reality – unemployment.

The visual rhetoric which accompanied FDR's verbal imagery was established primarily through FSA photographs, where emphasis was placed on a conception of a heroic poor --the suffering but deserving blue-collar or farm class. FSA photographs so

pervaded the media that images of sharecroppers and tenant farmers from the South and Midwest came to represent Roosevelt’s rhetorical forgotten man. In addition to forging a visual representation of a forgotten man, FSA images were meant to appeal to the emotions of the white-collar classes, politicians and labor leaders who fought for greater recognition of their constituents. Thus, FSA visual rhetoric of the forgotten man, as used in magazines and news articles, strongly influenced how the white-collar classes interpreted political policy directed toward New Deal economic reforms. Moreover, FSA photographs drew attention to the disparity between American class identities and suggested rhetorically that members of the lower classes were essentially the same as members of the upper classes. Interestingly, these conflicting representations were conflated into the image of the forgotten man as the average, but heroic and generous, "common" American.

The legacy of the RA/FSA/OWI, then, is its ability to re-shape and re-invent the recorded history of class experience in the 1930s. This legacy is also part of the contribution FSA photographs made to establishing an essential American identity as one of classlessness; if the destitute were depicted as “one of us” from the white-collar class just down-on-their-luck, then "we" could see ourselves in their image. Holding the mirror up to reflect Americans’ best and worst qualities was meant to humble the upper classes and emotionally boost the lower classes so they could see themselves in the reflection. Thus, the image of the forgotten man became a mutable form similar to the ideology surrounding the “mutable” class system in the United States: one suggesting equal opportunity and access for all members.

RA/FSA photos were not the first images of American poverty to illustrate the prejudice and denial directed within the U.S. toward immigrants and racial minorities. Jacob Riis had addressed the ignorance of Americans toward the conditions of poverty suffered by “outsiders” as early as the 1890s. In photographic documents of the devastating squalor found in industrialized urban centers, Riis produced visual accounts of a period in history most Americans wished to forget or deny completely. Louis Hine had followed Riis’s lead in producing photographic documents of the poor and working classes in subsequent decades. The works of both men influenced the photographic

---

86 See Paula Rabinowitz, They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary (London: Verso, 1994), 37-38, for commentary on the emergence of photography coinciding with the rise of commodity culture.
documents of the 1930s, when “average” Americans saw, many for the first time, the reality of poverty in their midst.87

**Formation of the RA/FSA**

On April 30, 1935, President Roosevelt signed an executive order to establish the Resettlement Administration (RA) to document and ultimately alleviate the plight of the rural poor and migrant farmers displaced by the dust storms and boll weevil infestations of the previous decade. Roosevelt appointed Rexford Tugwell, an agricultural expert, professor of economics, and a member of FDR’s “Brain Trust,” to head the Rural Resettlement Administration and later the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). When Tugwell experienced problems explaining his economic programs to Congress and getting legislation passed, he called on a former colleague at Columbia University, Roy Stryker, to “show city people what it’s like to live on a farm.”88 While teaching at Columbia, Stryker had used photographs to help students understand economics, so Tugwell thought Stryker might employ the same technique in educating members of Congress to the necessity of initiatives put before them in New Deal legislation. Tugwell wanted him to manage the History Section, formed under the Resettlement Administration, with particular “regard to the historical, sociological, and economic aspects of several programs and their accomplishments.”89

In 1935 Stryker joined the Roosevelt administration as head of the History Section under the direction of Tugwell and the Resettlement Administration, subsequently re-named the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937.90 Stryker’s first assignment was to pick photographs for a book entitled *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement*. Impressed by the work of photographer Louis Hine, Stryker sought an aesthetic sensibility that would depict the kind of *truthfulness* he perceived in Hine’s work. Stryker envisioned the work of the History Section to be a

---

89 Anderson, 4.
90 Rexford Tugwell left the RA in 1937.
record of American life and events that would last for future generations and he
subsequently assembled a team of photographers that could bring his vision to light.  

The team of photographers which Stryker assembled included Walker Evans,
Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Marion Post Wolcott, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, John
Vachon, Jack Delano, Carl Mydans, John Collier, and Gordon Parks, among others.
Each member contributed his or her own sense of style to the collection and impacted
the history of the RA/FSA in different ways. Most of the initial group of photographers
had studied photography as an art form or had training in the fine arts or journalism, so
they understood the importance of photography as a tool of persuasion. Stryker
believed that each photographer would contribute to the history of this era partly
because he or she grasped the importance and popularity of “picture-taking” as it was
developing in the 1930s. Small-format cameras and flash units were becoming available
to the general public simultaneously with the work of FSA photographers and the
burgeoning interest in photojournalism.

Despite the prior independent professional status of Stryker’s photographic staff,
Stryker maintained strict control over his team and dictated that they were to maintain a
sense of dignity in the depictions of the poor. Early in his eight-year tenure with the
RA/FSA, Stryker made it clear that he was interested in factual depictions of events only,
and that the propaganda aspect of the photographs was never his goal. Nonetheless,
Stryker maintained a strict moralistic view about what should or should not be
represented in the photographs. In a vehement attempt to protect the country’s positive
image, Stryker wrote idealized captions at the bottom of many photos, which changed
the meaning and affected the interpretation of the images portrayed. As Sally Stein
notes in her book on Marion Post Wolcott, the FSA project “avoided seeking out
regularly those juxtapositions that challenged the customary myths of American

91 Louis Hine actually worked for the WPA National Research Project between 1936 and
1937. He was part of the survey of 14 eastern industrial communities wherein he produced
portraits of African Americans that were remarkable in quality but few in number.
92 See F. Jack Hurley, Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary
Photography in the Thirties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), for background
information on RA/FSA photographers.
93 Maurice Berger, How Art Becomes History: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture in
of the Photography” in Thinking Photography, Victor Burgin, ed., (London: Macmillan, 1982), 110-
141.
94 Anderson, 6-7.
democracy." Stein then quoted Warren Susman's articulate summation of those myths in *Culture and Commitment:* "the concept of the integrity of the individual; the concept of responsible leadership; the belief in self-government; the concept of individual liberty and of opportunity." In response to maintaining these myths, Stryker is thought to have destroyed a large number of negatives in the archive by punching holes through them, presumably because they were damaging to the preferred image of America.

(Fig. 5) Blacksmith in Marshall, TX (1939), Russell Lee
(Fig. 5.5) Living Room of Farmer in Yuba County, CA (1939), Russell Lee

Given the importance of his goals, Stryker maintained a dictatorial command of the project throughout its existence. However, it is also probably due to Stryker that the majority of FSA work is filled with compassion and integrity for individual human beings and their lives. Stryker was acutely aware of the persuasive power of photography. In the introduction to *In This Proud Land,* a book co-authored by Stryker and Nancy Wood, he wrote, "[o]ur photographers had one thing in common, and that was a deep respect for human beings." At other times Stryker defended this romanticized depiction of the poor and destitute which he encouraged RA/FSA photographers to project by saying:

The pictures that were used [by the press] were mostly pictures of the dust bowl and migrants and half-starved cattle. But probably half of the file contained positive pictures, the kind that gave the heart a tug . . . those tragic, beautiful faces were what inspired [John Steinbeck] to

---

98 Stryker and Wood, 7.
write *The Grapes of Wrath*. He caught in words everything the photographers were trying to say in pictures. Dignity versus despair. Maybe I’m a fool, but I believe that dignity wins out.99

**Creating the Myth**

From the beginning of the History Section project, the photos proved a vital asset for Tugwell in impressing upon Congress the need for certain government aid programs. Since New Deal policies met the most resistance from Southern Congressmen, the photos were originally meant to sway members by making them aware, through visual imagery, of the agricultural devastation affecting areas in the South and Midwest. The primary goal of the FSA was to help poor farmers, and while meeting that objective, photographers would simultaneously build a great file of images of American life. Consequently, numerous photographs showed both fecund and barren landscapes as well as images of everyday life for middle and working-class Americans. These latter photos complemented the photographs of agricultural devastation and maintained a balance of sorts in the documenting of American life and history, while also providing propaganda necessary to achieve legislative reform.

Of course, the conservative politics and fiercely independent nature of the Southern middle and upper classes did not always make the FSA’s aim easy to achieve. Southern aristocrats had both a strong sense of authority and an idealized view of Southern history, leading Southern leaders to resent anyone who challenged Southern practices or lifestyles.100 For those reasons, the South was probably the hardest place to sell New Deal images of the ideal past and the forgotten man. Roosevelt was successful, however, in garnering support from Southern Congressmen. He needed them as much as they needed him to inspire recovery in the beleaguered South. For Roosevelt, the greatest challenge facing the South was the alleviation of poverty, not the maintenance of white supremacy. He understood that to gain Southern favor he would need to focus on the former. For Southern leaders, government aid was desperately needed to boost the plunging regional economy. It is ironic, then, that the Democrat-held Congress was dominated by long-time Southern politicians who eagerly aligned

---

99 Stryker and Wood, 14.
100 Wecter, 158.
themselves with FDR to pass some of the greatest reform legislation in the nation’s history.\textsuperscript{101}

\textbf{(Fig. 6) Plantation Overseer (1936), Dorothea Lange}

Consequently, FSA photographs did not depict the complete range of American lifestyles. The focus was clearly on rural folk, though only on the impoverished in specific rural areas. Most often, photographs taken on behalf of the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration depict Southern tenant farmers and migrant sharecroppers as tragic, impoverished, hopeless, nomadic people, doomed to a life of misery. In the photographs we see people of varying ages and of both genders all categorized into a class that we might consider the “lost” class in American society. Photographs did not capture the growing standardization among regions transformed by industrialization and modernization. For example, a disproportionate number of the photographs come from regions of the South, West, and Southern Mid-west sections of the country.

Photographs taken by FSA photographers tended to show the reality of life in the South for the poorest of the poor in the U.S.\textsuperscript{102} The South did not consist of small family farms as did the Midwest, nor did it have a recent frontier history as in the West. Neither

\textsuperscript{101} Freidel, 45-46.
\textsuperscript{102} Freidel, 38. Farm income for some in several Southern states had fallen to less than $100 a year by 1933.
did Southerners share in the promise of a better future through industry as did much of the North.\textsuperscript{103} What the South did have was a long legacy of prejudice toward the poorest and most alienated citizens in their region. Poor white tenant farmers and sharecroppers were frequently exposed to prejudice similar to that inflicted upon African Americans. Jim Crow laws and the legacy of slavery were potent forces in the South made visible in signs ordering the separation of non-whites from whites. The well established image of poor Southern whites as “crackers,” “linheads,” “hillbillies,” and “white trash” existed long before the 1930s.\textsuperscript{104} And so the social status and representation of poor whites in the South fared not much better than that of African Americans.

As early as 1728 the image of poor whites in the South was established by William Byrd, on a mission for King George of England to find the exact boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. Byrd wrote a description of the inhabitants he encountered which characterized them as “‘indolent wretches’ with ‘custard complexions’ who practiced their vices publicly and their virtues in intense privacy and lived in a ‘dirty state of nature’. . . subject to ‘gross humors’ and ‘a lazy, creeping habit’ that kept them squatting on a frontier.”\textsuperscript{105} This image of poor whites in the South has remained in the minds of Americans ever since, as evidenced by the contemporary currency given phrases such as "hillbilly," "redneck," and "white trash," and partly due to its repetition in fictional literature and “scientific” studies that maintained the stereotypical social orders of class based on income. By the end of the 1920s poor white rural experience had been long exploited through fiction, while Southern industrial workers were totally ignored or confused with the image of Northern industrial laborers. Conventional stereotypes remained ever present in the minds of most American leaders, exacerbating the tensions between FDR’s administration and Southern legislators. The mind-sets of the South and North were totally different --Northern lawmakers saw themselves as liberal reformers while their Southern counterparts believed themselves the guardians of romantic gentility. Thus, the Roosevelt administration placed its focus on changing the attitudes of Southern legislators through visible means. Partly didactic and partly

\textsuperscript{103} Freidel, 57.
\textsuperscript{104} Sylvia Jenkins Cook, \textit{From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), ix.
\textsuperscript{105} as quoted in Cook, 3.
humiliation, the products of RA/FSA photographs exploited stereotypical representations of poor whites in the South for the benefit of New Deal reform initiatives.

If Roosevelt’s spoken image of the forgotten man was nebulous, here were the images that gave the forgotten ones form. Southern agrarian workers became symbolic “poster children” for the economic devastation of the whole country through the use of photography emphasizing the concepts of a deserving poor, helpless victims, American homogeneity, and the universal mono-class vision of Americans which Roosevelt’s New Deal administration alleged. Messages conveyed in RA/FSA photos made poor and working-class Americans seem like victims of “uncontrolled” forces of nature rather than racism, xenophobia, poor work policies, and exploitative wages, thereby denying the reality of practices and ideologies which contributed to the disparity between classes. In doing so, this perspective merged the concept of class into one large homogenous image of an American middle class.

In many ways these photographs also contributed to the image of democracy as Roosevelt re-defined it. FSA photographs were meant to appeal to middle-class viewers who would hopefully react with pity and charity toward the less fortunate. In order to make this appeal, FSA photographers had to form an image of the poor that was similar enough to that of the middle class that the subjects in photographs would be accepted as “us.” Thus the photographers relied heavily on symbolism to create the concept of likeness.

(Fig. 7) Farm mother with her two children (1939), Russell Lee
(Fig. 8) Madonna of the Meadows (c. 1505-06), Raphael
Jeffersonian yeoman farmers, courageous pioneers, and Christian Madonnas were just some of the signs which coded the photographs with an American identity. Of course, these WASP symbols were already naturalized in American culture, so they were easily assimilated into the existing hegemony.

Photographers working in the North and West largely focused on the same thematic material as their colleagues in the South. Examination of photographic works from numerous RA/FSA artists reveal consistent practices no matter where the locality. In particular, an emphasis on separation of genders, races, and classes appear in photographs from all regions of the country. Separation into these spheres was very much a part of people’s lives in the 1930’s and the images in RA/FSA photos kept the white middle-class viewer separate from those people. Magazines actually reinforced these separations by ignoring the existence of unemployment or hard times, except in certain instances which catered to economizing the household budget. For example, recipes might suggest low-cost alternatives to meat dishes or ways to decorate on a budget, but in general, magazines fostered white-collar consumption habits and lifestyles. In contrast, RA/FSA photos made it clear that we (the white-collar spectator) are not them. The emphasis on “us” versus “them” put the audience in a position of superiority and reinforced the notion that the white-collar class held more power than the blue-collar class. The implications which followed also suggested that urban whites were superior to rural whites and city workers were of greater value than country workers.

**Cultural Context**

With the establishment of the RA/FSA photographic sections new and more popular forms of recorded suffering emerged in the picture-text genre. Most photographers who worked for the RA/FSA agreed with the humanitarian mission of the New Deal programs. They believed in the need for propaganda to draw attention to the plight of the poor, the displaced, and the disenfranchised. Consequently they rarely sought to challenge myths of American democracy: integrity of the individual, responsible leadership, belief in self-government, and individual liberty and opportunity for all.106 Occasionally photographers did find subtle ways to criticize the status quo; often telling a narrative through public signs (such as the photos depicting signs for

---

“Whites Only”), or other codes that signified class and racial tensions in the South and West. Roy Stryker requested that his FSA photographers shoot the ordinary and the meaningful rather than the unique, spectacular or bizarre, but as artists and documentarians, the photographers frequently found themselves moved to record the extremes around them. Dorothea Lange was particularly drawn to documentary for this reason. One can interpret in her work an almost Jeffersonian notion that people who worked with their hands were more “real” than others – closer to the earth, God, and humanity.\(^\text{107}\)

Lange once explained that she wanted “to say something about the despised, the defeated, the alienated…about the crippled, the helpless, the rootless…about duress and trouble…about the last ditch.”\(^\text{108}\) Writer and economist Paul Schuster Taylor gave her that opportunity. Migrants were traveling about the agricultural counties, working when they could, squatting in makeshift camps by the roadside without adequate shelter, sanitation, or drinking water. Taylor envisioned a series of “public camps” that would provide the migrants minimum decencies and access to public services. Wishing to communicate the gravity of the social situation Taylor hired Dorothea Lange to shoot photographs, and he used a good deal of direct quotation in his reports. “[L]et the migrants tell in their own words what they left behind and what they seek,” Taylor told his team members. “By the time you statisticians know the numbers, what I’m trying to tell you in advance about will be history, and you’ll be too late.”\(^\text{109}\) The photographs in Taylor’s reports made a huge impact on the government and proved to be immensely influential in acquiring needed aid for the migrants.

Lange and Taylor’s reports to the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) led to several immediate relief measures in California, including the establishment of the first migrant relief camps. Lange’s work also appeared in several printings of the San Francisco News, and again its impact resulted in immediate aid dispatched by the federal government to feed California migrant families. The duo continued to work together on relief projects which secured food and shelter for other migrants arriving in

\(^{107}\) Gawthrop, The Administrative Process, 77.
\(^{108}\) Milton Meltzer, Dorothea Lange: Life Through the Camera (New York: Viking Kestrel, 1985), 79.
California. Their collaboration, the first between a social scientist and a photographer, proved to be a successful mixture of scientific “fact” enhanced by photographic image.110

The work Lange and Taylor did for SERA reports provided a classic example of how documentary imagery could be wedded to the printed word. Their partnership during the winter of 1938-39 produced An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion, one of the first texts to merge image and word that was not part of a photojournalistic project. The dialectic between photojournalism and documentary artistic/scientific studies cannot be overlooked, however, since they were forming into genres simultaneously. Lange and Taylor’s American Exodus represented a form of social criticism and political propaganda in the thirties.111 In its current incarnation the book remains a sentimentalized record of history that paradoxically did as much to reinforce the status quo of race, class, and gender divisions as it did to gain aid to migrant farmers.

Stylizing the Rhetoric

Franklin Roosevelt had called them the “forgotten” ones, but the iconography and visual rhetoric of most social documentary of the 1930s simplified, ennobled, and sentimentalized the expressions, gestures, and compositions of people appearing in the images. Evidence of this “stylization” permeated RA/FSA photographs. Only in a few instances were individuals identified by name. Rather, the images became iconic: symbols for others like them – the wronged, the strong, the indomitable casualties of natural and economic systems beyond their control. So while the literature of the first half of the 1930s did little to rouse the masses toward awareness of their proletarian status and revolutionary potential, RA/FSA photographs had a tremendously energizing impact on the American people. Appearing as they did in popular magazines and national newspapers, the photographs allowed Americans to see what other Americans looked like.112 Photographs had the advantage of being accessible to a wide range of...
races and classes. Many Americans saw the photos published in newspapers and magazines, thus showing the well-to-do, well-intentioned, and well-placed the impoverished conditions which existed in their own communities and in similar communities across the country.

One result of publishing these photographs was an unacknowledged form of maintaining social order and social structure created by reassuring the white-collar class that they did, in fact, have it better than others while also urging them to help the poor. Photographs were used to make white-collar citizens aware of problems, piquing their interest in social concerns, and thus encouraging support for relief and reform legislation proposed by the government. By imposing an element of guilt upon the white-collar class, Roosevelt’s New Deal administration was constructing a new version of American morality. No doubt, these images helped make the Depression a subject of contemplation for everyone.\(^{113}\)

While the success of the RA/FSA agencies can be measured by the kinds of political and policy decisions made in the early to mid-thirties, it should be noted that RA/FSA photographs of the poor made relatively little impact on the national psyche until Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* became a runaway bestseller in 1939.\(^{114}\) Descendants of white Protestant pioneers, poor Southern whites were as hated for their class-status as immigrants and blacks were for their minority and “foreign” status, despite the efforts of RA/FSA photographers to change the stereotype. Published four years after the dust bowl storms and six years after the worst of the Depression horrors, Steinbeck’s novel captured the heroism and inherent characteristics of Americanism which RA/FSA photographers had attempted to project. Sylvia Cook noted, however, that Steinbeck’s Oakies and Arkies had to be moved out of the geographical South and into the West (mythic American landscape) before the general public accepted them as part of the mythic American and not as they had been stereotyped.\(^{115}\) Or, possibly, readers were desensitized and found the Arkies and Oakies of fiction more appealing than the strikers of proletarian novels. So, it was not until Steinbeck’s novel touched the hearts and minds of white-collar class Americans that the Arkies and Oakies became recognized as a

\(^{113}\) Anderson, 5-6.
\(^{114}\) Cook, xiv.
\(^{115}\) Cook, xiv.
national symbol for the forgotten ones rather than just a downtrodden regional stereotype.\textsuperscript{116}

\textit{Truth Telling and Social Documentary}

[RA/FSA photographers] found time to produce a series of the most remarkable human documents that were ever rendered in pictures . . . These documents told stories and told them with such simple and blunt directness that they made many a citizen wince . . . [H]ave a look into the faces of the men and the women in these pages. Listen to the story they tell and they will leave with you a feeling of a living experience you won’t forget.\textsuperscript{117}

Social documentary emerged as a medium for social criticism in the 1930s. Certainly, the use of photography to record or document images had become common prior to the 1930s, but only when the function of the RA/FSA photos became more than mere record did the influence and definition of documentary, as we now know it, come to be. In 1938 Edward Steichen wrote a review of the FSA photography unit in which he remarked that “one of the favored words . . . today is ‘documentary,’” emphasizing how important photographic technology had become. In his review Steichen noted that the photographers were asked to shoot “piles of this, stacks of that, yards of this, miles of that, boxes, bales, and timber” and that they were compiling a “picture record of rural America.”\textsuperscript{118}

As scholar William Stott has cautioned, understanding the significance of the term “documentary” as it was understood in the 1930s is of great import. Knowing how that legacy has affected American history, we can comprehend the significance of RA/FSA photographs, in the thirties and now. In \textit{Photography at the Dock}, Abigail Solomon-Godeau tells us that until the 1920’s and 1930s, documentary, as a genre and concept, did not even exist. All photographs were essentially documents of a person, place, or thing, and no one questioned how the images were constructed or what impact they might have had on an audience. In Solomon-Godeau’s words, “[P]hotography was understood as innately and inescapably performing a documentary function.”\textsuperscript{119}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{116} Cook, 176.
\textsuperscript{117} Edward Steichen as quoted in Stott, 11.
\textsuperscript{118} Stott, 11.
\end{flushright}
For this reason, Solomon-Godeau argues that documentary must be examined from three perspectives: as a historical construction, as a code or sign system (semiotics), and within the discursive spaces of the mass media, including the "discursive space" of the gallery and museum. She bases her argument on the presumption that "realism" is ostensibly connected to photography. It is the perception that photography is somehow depicting an unalterable truth that is one of its most powerful attributes; although it is this same perception that is also problematic and raises questions about the power of representation. As Michel Foucault has argued, the exercise of power creates and results in new objects of knowledge which then accumulate into new bodies of information. He states that "principles of exclusion and selection . . . point to an anonymous and polymorphous will to knowledge, capable of regular transformations and caught up in an identifiable play of dependence." These new forms of information function as a form of truth produced by a multitude of influences, but all to enhance the power of the producers. Control of the medium is, after all, control of the message.

Since all societies communicate through a system of arbitrary visual signage, it is then imperative to understand what the signs mean to any given society in a particular time because they are products of the institutionalized hegemony of the ruling class. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued, the assumption that photography represents an objective truth is primarily a way for society to confirm what the society already believes is true. Bourdieu argued that photography affirms "the complex ideological web that at any moment in historical time is perceived as reality tout court." He echoes Foucault’s analysis that ideology and authoritative power are never fixed, but rather malleable and based on the needs and desires of the dominant culture. Bourdieu differs from Foucault, however, in seeing that symbolic power systems, while closely entwined, still function in a hierarchically organized series of fields (Bourdieu's term). In Western cultures, science exists on a level of hierarchical order which places it above other forms of knowledge. Since photography functions, in some sense, as a scientific

---

120 Solomon-Godeau, 170.
121 Foucault, Ethics, 12.
122 Solomon-Godeau, 173.
technology (or field), we associate it with a form of “scientific truth” which, until recently in Western cultures, has been considered unquestionable.\textsuperscript{124}

The distinction between photography as a science and an aesthetic practice first appeared as a concern in the 1930s. With the rise of photojournalism as a profession and the availability of affordable cameras for entertainment purposes, there was need for distinction between the document and the snapshot. Documents were presumably recorded by “professionals” trained in documenting a truth rather than composing a portrait or work of art as a professional “art” photographer might do, and clearly distinct from what the untrained amateur might snap. “Professional” photographers, who defined themselves as documentarians or photojournalists, also wished to distinguish themselves from the propagandist who might use photography for his or her own political purposes.\textsuperscript{125} However, the assumption that photographs are untouched documents of truth denies the ability of the “professional” photographer to compose and select a “good” photograph. Many of the photographers hired by Roy Stryker had studied photography as an aesthetic art form or worked as professionals prior to their employment in the RA/FSA. Many of them also held strong opinions about the value of photographs for social commentary. As artist and writer Martha Rosler has observed, “Documentary photography has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics.”\textsuperscript{126} Moralism is more subtly portrayed than is political statement, with which people can agree or disagree as to accuracy. Morality also implies universal themes such as good and evil, or suffering and pleasure, which made the documentary genre well-suited to the needs of FDR’s administration in seeking to universalize its message.

An example of such work exists in \textit{American Exodus}, the book authored by Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor. In the book, the authors were careful to set-up an objective point of view, stating in the preface, “This is neither a book of photographs nor an illustrated book, in the traditional sense….We use the camera as a tool of research.”\textsuperscript{127} Lange and Taylor relied on the use of the term “documentary” as it was understood in the 1930s (and now) as a form of truth, a document of record, and they assumed the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Bourdieu, 21.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Solomon-Godeau, 171.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Lange and Taylor, 6.
\end{itemize}
reader shared their definition as noted in their statement: “We adhere to the standards of documentary photography as we have conceived them.” Moreover, the authors made it clear that they were simply reporting what their subjects had said: “Quotations which accompany photographs report what the persons photographed said, not what we think might be their unspoken thoughts. Where there are no people, and no other source is indicated, the quotation comes from persons whom we met in the field.” They continue in the next paragraph to claim, “the situations which we describe are [about] living participants who can speak. Many whom we met in the field vaguely regarded conversation with us as an opportunity to tell what they are up against to their government and to their countrymen at large.”

Clearly, the text and images in *American Exodus* were chosen for their universal qualities and intended to symbolize the abstract rather than the specific. The authors included portraits representing the folk, the common person, and the every-man speaking for humanity. Dignity and strength resound in the postures and facial expressions that signify the nobility of the popular and the simple. The historic and contemporary quotations chosen by Lange and Taylor to caption some of the photos adds to the romance and universality of this concept.

*Feeling vs. Fact*

In the 1930s, New Deal administrators and FSA photographers understood the argument that feelings counted more than fact. They believed that one could know another’s life if one could feel it because we are informed by emotion; one sees through one’s feelings. In an article titled “The Thirties” (1970), cultural theorist Warren Susman suggested that “the whole idea of documentary – not with words alone but with sight and sound—makes it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other’s experience.” This was exactly the premise of social documentary as it was constructed in the 1930s and why RA/FSA photographs had such an impact on that culture’s understanding of their world at that time.

The concept of documentation as a record of fact, or a witness to truth, was, however, more complicated than merely injecting emotive qualities into a static image. Within documentary, there are two kinds of meaning. The first assumes some possibility

---

128 Lange and Taylor, 6.
of intellectual verification of information; it records concrete examples and documents them as fact and visible truth. In the twenties, thirties, and forties, this frequently occurred in training-type films for industry such as worker education films. Secondly, there is the element of drama which must be “balanced” with the reality of the subject. This element informs the emotions. Both kinds of documentary defy comment because they both impose meaning onto a subject -- a meaning which renders information indisputable and interpretation superfluous.\textsuperscript{130}

As William Stott noted in his book \textit{Documentary Expression and Thirties America}, when people spoke about documentary in the 1930s "they usually meant social documentary – as we do today."\textsuperscript{131} Stott makes a distinction between human documents, as defined by Steichen, and social documentary, which educates one's feelings as human documents do but with a difference. Whereas human documents show the individual undergoing perennial and unpreventable events such as those that define human existence -- birth, death, disease, work, weather, and the pleasures and dangers of the natural world -- by contrast, social documentary shows the individual at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary.\textsuperscript{132} These are conditions specific to a certain time and place, such as racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, the Depression, pollution, terrorism, etc. Thus, as Stott defines it, human documentary deals with natural phenomena and social documentary deals with man-made situations.\textsuperscript{133}

Stott cites an example of the application of these two theories in explaining that while Herbert Hoover spoke of the Depression as a natural phenomenon, unappeasable as drought, something that could only be endured, Franklin Roosevelt most often pictured it as man-made and correctable by social modification. For Hoover, the crisis was sufferable but unalterable. For Roosevelt, it was just the opposite, a belief made clear by his 1932 Democratic nomination acceptance speech in which Roosevelt declared, “Our Republican leaders tell us economic laws --sacred, inviolable, unchangeable—that these laws cause panics which no one could prevent . . . . We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature. They are made by

\textsuperscript{130} Stott, 20.  
\textsuperscript{131} Stott,19.  
\textsuperscript{132} Stott, 11.  
\textsuperscript{133} Stott, 19.
human beings.”

Many of the original RA/FSA photographers agreed with Roosevelt, particularly Dorothea Lange, whose work on migrant workers in California as presented to Roy Stryker led to Lange’s immediate hiring as the first Resettlement Administration photographer.

**Documents or Documentary**

Social documentary is a form of visual rhetoric especially based on the emotive quality of its subject. Feelings are a primary aspect of the medium, not just reportage. Hence, social documentary is always a construction determined by its use as propaganda. As Solomon-Godeau suggests, scholars and spectators have not paid enough attention to the intention of the photographer behind the images in photographs. She argues that audiences rarely think about the author’s intent or manipulation of a scene or composition because the spectator assumes photographs are unaltered moments in time. But knowing the rationale behind photographers’ work, the patron who commissioned the work, and the venues in which photographs appeared or were exhibited can enlighten one to the many discourses vying for interpretation over these numerous texts.

This was particularly true for spectators in the 1930s, when media representation was a relatively new form of social communication. Of course, spectators in the 1930s should not be compared to the jaded and media savvy consumers of today.

Photography was one of the many public discourses that presupposed a first-hand account of a situation. A similar approach could be found in the proletarian literature of the time where the author’s biography always carried with it a “blue-collar” pedigree. Identification with the working-class gave authors credibility as being one of “the people.” The same strategy was found in novels, plays, radio soap operas, and many magazine advertisements, which could be equally used as propaganda for commercial gain or for altruistic endeavors. Because of its apparent connection to “truth” telling, photography may have been the one medium best suited to the power of

---

134 Stott, 20-21.
135 Solomon-Godeau, 170.
the ruling classes to naturalize certain ideologies. Roland Barthes asserts that it is part of the photographer's job to represent truth as we know and expect it to be.\textsuperscript{137}

RA/FSA photographers, along with inter-war filmmakers, photojournalists, and literary novelists, used the concept of documentary to create a truth as they saw it. They understood that the heart of documentary is not form, style, or medium, but always content. And, more importantly, photographers understood the element of drama as used in Hollywood films of the 1930s. In fact, the visual rhetoric in FSA photos was quite similar to the visual rhetoric used in films. And of course, the element of drama was found not only in movies, but in all of the other arts and popular media: newspaper comics, radio soap operas, WPA murals, literary fiction, and popular music.

William Stott notes that confession literature also became very popular in the thirties. Magazines such as \textit{True Confession}, \textit{True Detective}, \textit{True Romance}, and \textit{True Story} all acquired enormous popularity in the 1920s and 1930s. It is a vicarious method of documentary: “I suffered, I was there.” According to Stott, the concept of “true confession provided the rhetoric for much of the thirties ‘common man’ vernacular literature.”\textsuperscript{138} Though the concept of a true confession influenced literature, movies, and radio soap operas, it most strongly influenced the contemporary style of documentary photography toward service as a witness to the verbal and written word. The efficacy of using this method in documentary was that it enhanced the value of truth and reality by demonstrating how someone could be a victim of his/her situation while still having the appropriate character -- courage, honesty, perseverance, industry, etceteras -- to overcome adversity. It was, as Stott argues, “the foundation of American values.”\textsuperscript{139}

The concept of objective truth-telling developed not only in popular literature, journalism and visual mediums, but in the performing arts as well. Theater historian Mordecai Gorelik observed that the documentary plays of the thirties owed whatever strength they had to the “undisputed newspaper accounts and public statements "upon


\textsuperscript{138} Stott, 44.

\textsuperscript{139} Stott, 42. See also James Boylan, “Publicity for the Great Depression: Newspaper Default and Literary Reportage,” in Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens, eds. \textit{Mass Media Between the Wars: Perceptions of Cultural Tension, 1918-1941} (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 162-164.
which they were based. Plays depended on and enhanced the drama of “reported” stories, but they also relied on the fact that people believed in the accuracy of a first-hand telling of an event – never assuming that the tale was an interpretation of an event. Indeed, as Stott suggests, in the 1930s an empirical account of an event was considered fact.

Like theater, documentary photography demanded drama to make it appealing. There was little intrigue or sustained interest in the intellectual document or record because it must have “human” or emotional value to be of use as documentary in the way we think of it now, and as the genre was similarly constructed in the thirties. As always, drama was used to engage the viewer/spectator with the subject. Filmmakers have long realized that the spectator must relate to the images on some level – if not by class, race, or gender, then by the recognition of shared humanity. RA/FSA photographs were sentimental and composed to provoke the illusion of a “reality,” whether empirical or imagined, within the spectator. Consequently the spectator was expected to be “moved” to action. As William Stott has articulated, FSA photographers knew that the document “should express as much moral damage as possible – not to inform the feeling but to ensure that it will be unformed, directionless, and self-indulgent, thereby making it a universal for everyone.” Roy Stryker also understood the necessity of emphasizing the emotional in a photo. He felt that “[a] good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person looks like, but it must also tell the audience what it would feel like to be an actual witness to the scene.” His photography team delivered what he wanted, but he also constructed the meaning of these photos by writing captions on them based on his own interpretation, or his own desire for what they should represent.

Since FSA photos were social documents intended to increase knowledge of public facts and sharpen feelings, their goal was not only to put the spectator in touch with the perennial human spirit, but also to show that spirit struggling in a particular social context at a specific historical moment. Documentary became the format of choice for visual artists during the Depression decade. Documentary was also defined by that time as the most democratic of genres because it dignified the usual and

---

140 as quoted in Stott, 14.
141 Stott, 17.
142 Stott, 29.
common in humans and situations, contrary to the normal reportage of journalists. Even when the subject itself was not common or about the common, it was viewed from the perspective of ordinary folk. Documentary seldom portrayed the rich or wealthy. If it did, it was to show the relative inhumanity of the elite and the powerful.

**The Making of Social Documentary**

One important aspect of social documentary photographs (or films) is that they are seldom meant for an audience of similar race, class, or ethnicity as those depicted in the photograph (or film). They are most often used, and therefore produced, with a middle-class audience in mind. The paradox of the documentary is such that it simultaneously constructs the subjects in the photograph or film as “victims” that will be saved or helped by the spectator’s awareness, and at the same time, these “victims” are made to seem like us, close enough to our own likeness and reality that we fear not helping or supporting them lest we become like them due to some misfortune. This fear echoes Herbert Hoover’s perception that human conditions were uncontrollable, and thus humans had no power over their own destiny. Furthering the fear is the fact that documentaries depend on the conception of the people and conditions we see represented before us as the Other; in other words, someone not like us. In effect, FSA photographs functioned as warnings to the upper classes in the same way that *Vanitas* paintings warned the 17th century Dutch merchant class of the impending doom awaiting them if they failed to follow the rules of God and society. We might question the venues in which documentary photographs and films were shown during the 1930s and learn who the intended audience was meant to be. Documentary photography typically focuses on aberrations, and on depictions of the “Other” made specifically to appeal to the moral and psychological values of a middle-class audience. New picture magazines such as *Life* (1936) and *Look* (1937) also appealed to an educated middle-class consumer. Roy Stryker encouraged the use of RA/FSA photographs in these magazines.

Clearly, RA/FSA photographs and especially the “documentary-like” films produced under New Deal patronage were meant to address a specific audience, one largely different from their subjects. For instance, Pare Lorentz made films about agrarian disasters and misuse of land not for an audience of farmers, but for an

---

143 Stott, 20.
educated middle class, the same audience RA/FSA photographs aimed to address. In a
testament to the power of “documentary” truth, filmmaker Lorentz declared that Dorothea
Lange’s photographs and John Steinbeck’s fiction “have done more for the Okies than
all the politicians in the country . . . proof that good art is good propaganda.” Linking
propaganda to art made it acceptable to use propaganda for positive “effect,” and those
interested in communicating with the masses understood its value. Clearly, RA/FSA
photographs were selectively chosen for their positive propagandistic use to sell
legislators and politicians on New Deal relief policies. Again, this audience was a select
group of educated middle to upper-class spectators.

Roy Stryker also encouraged his photographers to construct a visual
representation most conducive to manipulation of public opinion. Stryker once wrote to
Marion Post Wolcott and asked her to portray a certain type of image, specifically more
blacks at work, "to show how the relief programs had benefited them and were resulting
in what was expected." In another shooting script Stryker instructed Wolcott to:

Watch particularly for more pictures which cover the food
diet problems of FSA. We want any type of photography
which emphasizes the good results (if there are any) of the
FSA Rehabilitation Supervision Program. We need more
canned goods pictures out of the South. Get a little more
variation in these. These are terribly important to our
"higher ups."

Two examples of Post Wolcott’s response to Stryker’s request can be seen in the
photos below.

---

144 Stott, 24.
145 Hurley, Marion Post Wolcott, 44.
146 Stryker papers, Stryker to Post letter, March 16, 1939, Reel 1. Stryker’s papers may be
found on microfilm at Ohio State University. See David G. Horvath, ed., Roy Stryker Papers: 1912-
1972; a Guide to the Microfilm Edition (Sandford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America [1978,
The photograph on the left demonstrates a construction of both the servile imagery of a black woman and also the industry with which the government had helped her learn to become self-sufficient by canning. “Look how nicely she has done with our help,” appears to be the message sent by Washington. The same might be said for the white woman, shown here with only one child, but most likely the mother of several more children. Focus is placed on both women's industry and not on their role as mothers, appealing to middle-class viewers who wanted to know that government funds were helping those deserving of help and not women who bore more children than they could feed or clothe.

Stryker encouraged photos of white farmers instead of black ones because people in the North would identity with them more – believing that white farmers were
more deserving of help. He made a similar request of Dorothea Lange in a letter from Stryker dated January 1936:

Would you, in the next few days, take for us some good slum pictures in the San Francisco area. (Of course, no California city has slums, but I’ll bet you can find them.) We need to vary the diet in some of our exhibits here by showing some western poverty instead of all south and east . . . . When you get to Los Angeles, I think it might be worthwhile to see if you can pick up some good slum pictures there also. Do not forget that we need some of the rural slum type of thing, as well as the urban.

One must consider that images taken out of context become objectified and easily universalized into a symbol or stereotypical image of the Other, which is exactly why they were so successful as pro-New Deal propaganda. In fact, the propagandistic symbolism of RA/FSA photos depended on silent presumptions about the American mythologies of independent self-reliance, connection to land, and puritan morality. Signs of agrarian life paradoxically represented both tragedy and dignity. The land was a metaphor for a people who could be productive if just given the aid (nourishment) necessary to help them prosper on their own. Consider, for example, Dorothea Lange’s work for American Exodus. Most of her photos are shot from below so that the subject appears slightly above the viewer/photographer. This suggests a certain dignity and authority in her imagery, particularly when set in a particular landscape for effect.

A comparative analysis of two Lange photos in American Exodus exemplifies this difference. The photograph of a lean, white, middle-aged woman leaning on a column in front of a stately architectural form is captioned with the following statement:

The collapse of the plantation system, rendered inevitable by its exploitation of land and labor, leaves in its wake depleted soil, shoddy livestock, inadequate farm equipment, crude agricultural practices, crippled institutions, and defeated and impoverished people.

Coupled with another photo, this text could refer to the tenant farmer or sharecropper displaced by the failed land, but used in relation to this particular photo, its significance changes. The implication is that this woman may have had, or could have or should

147 Hurley, Marion Post Wolcott, 68.
148 Hurley, Portrait of a Decade, 70.
149 Lange and Taylor, 17.
have, much more than she currently displays. Her outward gaze toward some undefined space suggests a certain nostalgia, as though she is gazing upon the land she once owned or worked, but is left now with only the memories and remnants of that time. Her (assumed) loss is not lost on the viewer, and her sophisticated posture, in addition to the size and majesty of the building behind her, suggest that she was once one of “us,” and could be again if only given the appropriate boost. FSA photographers typically used this sort of manipulated visual rhetoric in their attempt to “sell” New Deal policies.

(Fig. 11) *Lower Piedmont* (1937), Dorothea Lange
(Fig. 12) *Couple, Born in Slavery* (1937), Dorothea Lange

The same kind of attention, however, is not often given to images of African Americans. Despite Lange’s own integrity and desire to give dignity and honor to her subjects, her portrayal of social stratifications does little to challenge the social paradigm. On the page preceding the white woman standing on the (plantation) veranda is a closely-cropped photo of an African American couple sitting in front of another building. We do not see enough of the building to determine what it is -- a home, a business -- but we can tell that it appears to be made of wood. The man’s pants are patched and his shirt seems a size too small. The woman wears a scarf on her head reminiscent of a mammy character in a 1930s movie. They represent a “landless” couple that has never, nor will ever, own their own property. This couple looks outward as well, but without any expression of longing. Rather, they look confused and concerned. There is none of the relaxed attitude found in the photo of the woman on the veranda. The close cropping of Lange’s camera frame only exaggerates their anxious facial expressions.
Assuredly, many RA/FSA photographers desired to build a pathos and sympathy into the images they shot for the government. In some cases it may have been with the best of intentions as a form of social commentary and societal criticism, but their lack of control over the eventual context of these photographs allowed the final works of many photographers to be used to perpetuate the emblematic or archetypal images used to sell the public on New Deal initiatives. All of these signs were universalized in RA/FSA photography to educate the white-collar class spectators to the interests of Roosevelt’s administration.

**Iconography of RA-FSA Photographs**

The iconography of the 1930s was developed by looking back to the past and idealizing it. Because of this idealized mythology, RA/FSA photographers contributed to, and sometimes established (albeit unconsciously), the stereotypical myths of the Other: the poor, black, Asian, Native American, and un-propertied people. Many of these same stereotypes have continued into the present. The unfavorable representation of African Americans and the poor (particularly women) is perpetuated through present-day images of welfare recipients (or welfare mothers) considered incapable of helping themselves or, worse yet, unwilling to take responsibility for themselves.

The image of helpless and dependent mothers was a large part of RA/FSA file shots. The same stereotypical images that we see today in magazines or newspapers appear in the files too: women with tattered clothing; women with less than ideal body-types, according to contemporary standards; women who appear older than their years; and women surrounded by an environment that seems simultaneously cluttered with debris and useless items, or barren and starved for consumer goods. Too often there was an emphasis on the fecundity of these women.

![Image](Fig. 13) Gee’s Bend, Alabama (1937), Arthur Rothstein
While conservatives and Catholics alike protested loudly, and sometimes violently, against birth control, the image of poor women with several children raised the ire of many in the white-collar class. What appeared in many RA/FSA photos was a picture of a mother with some children, but often not all of her children. Seldom do we see children in groups of four or more particularly if they are siblings. So while the image of “good” citizenship and family morality demanded women be seen as mothers, there appears to have been a selective aspect in regard to depicting women with too many children.

The published photos gave the impression that Americans lived in small family units, sometimes with extended family members such as grandparents. These images persisted despite the fact that many adult men, women and young teens of both sexes left their homes and families to search for work elsewhere, leaving wives and mothers to fend for themselves and their younger children.\textsuperscript{150} Nor do these images reflect the significant drop in marriage and birth rates during the Depression. Many men abandoned their families rather than divorce them because such formal legal procedures were too expensive.\textsuperscript{151} For the most part, women fared better psychologically than men, who felt defeated by lack of wage-work. With the male role of ”bread-winner” under siege, emphasis on the separation of duties by gender increased in psychological importance. Consequently, many women found ways to capitalize on their domestic

\textsuperscript{150} Susan Ware, \textit{Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930's} (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 33.

\textsuperscript{151} Ware, 6-7. And Alice Kessler-Harris, \textit{Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview} (New York: Feminist Press, 1981), 138-139.
skills. They took in boarders, and did laundry, sewing, ironing, and various other domestic duties to help out. Sometimes a small business was started in the home, such as beauty parlors, cleaning and pressing businesses, dressmaking shops, or bakeries. Women on farms sold produce and eggs. Rarely, however, did these pursuits result in more social power for women.  

The increase in work outside the home for women was already a growing reality for many American families prior to the Depression. Nonetheless, women remained closely tied to the role of nurturer and caregiver. The idea of husband-wife relationships which stressed loving companionship rather than social and economic partnership between equals emerged as a new ideal in heterosexual relationships. According to Lois Scharf, “The debate over the ‘new woman’ of the previous decade, who combined work and family, was completely subsumed by anxiety over the ‘forgotten man’ who combined no work with a possibly demoralized and disintegrating family.” The “heightened concern for family stability and conflict over women’s paid work” could be seen in various media and cultural expressions which called for a return to the more traditional roles of women and men.  

Women were encouraged in the 1920’s to hire domestic servants and pursue other “womanly” activities, but in the 1930’s hired domestic help decreased as the Depression forced more women to do household chores themselves. Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd found that middle-class families adhered closely to the traditional allocation of social roles.  

Women were encouraged in the 1920’s to hire domestic servants and pursue other “womanly” activities, but in the 1930’s hired domestic help decreased as the Depression forced more women to do household chores themselves. Sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd found that middle-class families adhered closely to the traditional allocation of social roles.

---

152 Kessler-Harris, 127.
154 Scharf, 137.
157 see Robert and Helen Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture (1929). In 1927 the Lynd’s observed that “Middletown’s business class has stood firm in its deeply grooved habit of thought that the normal thing is for the husband to provide and for the wife to be provided for” (quoted in Scharf, 139). When the same families were interviewed again six years later, the Lynds found some flexibility in attitudes which occurred during the economic emergency.
toward married women since they traditionally expected to enter the workforce after marriage. But in white blue and white-collar class families women in the workforce were viewed as a temporary anomaly: only present until their husbands returned to work, at which time each would return to their traditional gender roles. Most Americans could not envision the social order in any other way. Women willingly went back to the home if a man got a job as her earning capacity was seen as both secondary in import and temporary in nature. Advice manuals encouraged and normalized this arrangement. If we consider the complexity of class along with the oppression of women and people of color, RA/FSA photographs maintained and reinforced popular beliefs about social order and gender division. Women in these photographs were most likely seen in the context of motherhood and therefore dependent on financial support from someone else’s wage-labor. African Americans were seen most frequently in the context of poverty and despair, working at hard labor for someone else’s business. Occasionally, there is an element of resistance and advocacy in the RA/FSA photographs, but we must remember that photographers had little control over how their photos would be used, in what context they would be shown, and how spectators might interpret their work. More often than not, Blacks in FSA photos were “read” as dumb, illiterate, or as buffoons (as commonly depicted in minstrel shows). Poor white folks were perceived as dirty, lazy, and irresponsible because of the contexts in which these images appeared and because of the stereotypes associated with poor Southern whites. Contrarily, blue and white-collar class white people in RA/FSA photos are often viewed as happy, independent, and responsible (deserving) citizens.

Lange’s photographs could easily be adapted to fit the ideological purposes of the New Deal because they are less about individuals than about symbols. They are not portraits of people, but symbolic portraits of a situation, an experience. Their appeal to the emotions of the middle-class viewer was particularly evident in Dorothea Lange’s portrayal of mothers. The emphasis on mothers and children was an iconic image that reminded viewers of a Christian reward of salvation based on suffering and sacrifice.

---

158 Kessler-Harris, 138-39, Ware, 29-30.
159 For a deeper discussion of the concept of mothering as the origination of women’s oppression, see works by Nancy Chodrow or Dorothy Dinnerstein. Both authors argue that family units determine society, and that law, politics, economics, and cultural institutions would be radically different if women did not have to think of themselves as mothers.
Migrant Mother is the most obvious example of the universalizing symbol of motherhood as constructed by Lange. Composed in the pyramidal design of Renaissance paintings of the Madonna and child, Lange’s photographs of women assure us, as viewers, that these women are indeed morally fit, but in an economically poor environment.

Wendy Kozol observes in her essay Madonnas of the Field that “women most frequently appear unproblematically tragic and deserving of government assistance.”¹⁶⁰ Their expression is typically fixed in the expressions of anxiety, worry, and hope, while men often appear dazed or in despair. It is these codes of expression which sold the public on New Deal initiatives to remedy their current economic situation. Of course these images never confront the reasons for the family’s trouble. No middle-class spectator was expected to consider the social paradigm or social ideology which contributed to the family’s tragedy. Thus, there is little encouragement for the viewer to question the elements of society which produced or contributed to these situations. Rather, they simply offer a document of the results and the need for an immediate fix.

Kozol offers another reading of the representation of women in Lange's work, arguing that these images of women were critical to the RA/FSA narrative of poverty and need because they constructed and reasserted dominant societal views on women and the family. She states:

There is little or no tenderness between husbands and wives; signs of intimacy exist only between parents and children. Rarely do images of mothers stress their sexuality, even when maternity is explicitly emphasized. Instead, the archetypal role of mother, lacking sexuality and full of good moral values, was depicted in countless pictures of women surrounded by their children.\textsuperscript{161}

Ioannis Stavrianos concurs with Kozol in asserting that even sexuality did not escape State ideology during the 1930s. With the task of controlling both economy and citizens, the State had somehow to find a balance between high population numbers and the low employment of its citizens. Stavrianos argues that the ideological concern over birth rate is evident in RA/FSA photographs which reduce the sensual and sexual aspects of individual subjects. Note for example, that Dorothea Lange’s series of Florence Thompson (\textit{Migrant Mother}) does not include all seven of Thompson’s children. We see only two young children, heads turned away from the camera, clinging to their mother and a baby in her arms. The choice to present this particular photo would have been informed by the audience most likely to view it, i.e. the white-collar class whose Christian morality would have looked down on this woman for having been a teen when her first child was born, thus not abiding by WASP ideals of sexual behavior.\textsuperscript{162}

Lange’s work also offers us a glimpse into the contradictory and difficult role of women under patriarchy. Viewed only as mothers, women were not acknowledged as anything other than a domestic worker and nurturer. Thus, women’s contribution to the family economy was discounted in deference to their role of nurturer and caregiver. Very seldom is women’s labor depicted in FSA photographs, but we see the effects of her deprivation from household accoutrements of the 1920/30s white-collar middle class, such as washing machines, stoves, vacuum cleaners, etc. The lack of these new

\textsuperscript{161} Kozol, 13.
\textsuperscript{162} For more on the censorship of this photo see Borhan, 190-191; Milton Meltzer, \textit{Dorothea Lange: A Photographers Life} (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 134-136; and Karin Becker Ohm, \textit{Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 79-87.
technologies made the disparity between middle-class and working-class or poor women even more visible.

What Lange’s photographs reveal is a tension between middle-class WASP ideology and the reality of women unable to participate in those values and lifestyles. The New Deal did little to challenge the status quo of gender and racial division despite the reforms and progress it made in legislation regarding work and welfare. It would be unfair, however, not to recognize the fact that the Roosevelt administration employed a relatively large number of women in high administrative positions who were successful in drawing attention to concerns for working women, as well as the welfare of women and children. The irony of this statistic, however, is that the network of influential women involved with the New Deal administration sought not to fight gender discrimination in jobs or opportunities, but rather to improve situations for women in the traditional roles of wife and mother.

While the work done by the group of highly-placed women Susan Ware refers to as the “Network” was immensely important in bettering the condition of women’s lives in the 1930s and beyond, they did not challenge gender oppression or work hard to improve the status or opportunities for women of color, single women, or women of unstable economic means. Like their middle-class sisters who followed them in Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, the network of women influential during the New Deal era saw women’s position and problems through their own middle or upper-class lenses, and had little impact on changing women’s previously prescribed social position and role. A similar situation occurred for African Americans in the 1930s. While more blacks were placed in decision-making positions within the government both regionally and at local levels, they were seldom in the most powerful positions and thus had little impact on the overall economic or social status of African Americans.

Selected Realities Behind FSA Photographs

In keeping with FDR’s rhetoric of the forgotten man, we can see that women were largely forgotten or pushed aside during the New Deal era. Married women were restricted by the expectation that they would stay home and not work. Thus, we usually only see men in soup lines, men struggling to organize, and men at employment relief

163 More information on women working in or around the New Deal administration can be found in Susan Ware’s Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
offices. Subsequently, images of the New Deal are largely preoccupied with white men and their employment or lack of work. Images of women tend to be of a maternal nature, despite the number of women who worked outside their homes to help support families. Strides women achieved in the workplace during the Depression were too often undermined by the fact that, as depicted in a film or novel, in the end, the girl succumbed to marriage. Like the “happy endings” in films, photographs under government patronage also had happy endings, as can be seen in the later work of FSA/OWI photographers. Popular media, as well as the work done by RA/FSA photographers, served the ultimate purpose of setting the world right again by presenting the image that everything and everyone was “in their proper place.” A letter from Roy Stryker addressed to Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein in 1942 illustrates the motivation behind certain images produced by FSA photographers. The heterosexual family units found so contentedly enjoying moments of togetherness were signs that American life and values were returning to the norm and life was “back on track.”

In *Prelude to Afternoon Meal: Carroll County, Georgia*, Jack Delano photographs a family at prayer before a meal. Parents sit next to one another, father at the head of the table, mother at his side, and the children placed conveniently by the photographer on either side of the table. It is a Norman Rockwell depiction of American values. A similar moment is constructed in Delano’s *Sunday Morning, White Plains, Georgia*. Though we see few elements of the location, we can be certain from the visual clues of space, wooden pews, and formal dress of the subjects that we are witnessing an institutionalized practice, be it religious or civic in function. The caption suggests to

(Fig. 16) *Prelude to Afternoon Meal: Carroll County, Georgia* (1941), Jack Delano
(Fig. 17) *Sunday Morning, White Plains, Georgia* (1941), Jack Delano
us that it is a religious service because it is occurring on Sunday morning, the day Christians set aside for worship. Viewed in this context, the images found in government-sponsored works were clearly meant to reflect the social order as Americans perceived it to be, with women in the domestic sphere, men in the public sphere, blacks separated from whites, and the habitually poor kept outside, at a distance.

It is fair to suggest based on the evidence presented here that women were presented with a construct of who they needed to be through media images of the ideal woman. Magazines told them that they must economize, and presented them with ideas on how to accomplish that task. Films told them that they could work in glamorous and well paid professions, as long as they refrained from work outside the home after a few years to pursue marriage. In various forms of visual, aural, and written culture, images instructed women to put motherhood and family above everything else. Women from various classes, ethnicities, and races identified with the images provided for them. It was not until the next decade and its war driven necessities that women actually discarded these images and proved them obsolete. Unfortunately, the delineation of boundaries during war time was suspended in the post-war reconstruction of gender roles. By the end of the 1940’s, women were again placed in a position of subservience.

**Summary**

Photographs taken for the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration offer a comprehensive survey of the various forms of rural poverty during the 1930s and early 1940s. In the liberal context of New Deal politics, it would have been difficult for a viewer of FSA photographs to argue that migrant workers or tenant farmers did not require financial assistance. Sympathy was elicited, concern was voiced, and the American people who were not the focus of FSA images responded to the need that was displayed before them. The central message contained in FSA images was clear: that poverty was not an acceptable part of American society and therefore must be eased, if not eradicated, for the mutual benefit of both the subject and the viewer of government photography.

FSA documentary photographs seemed to serve a practical purpose in the 1930s, not only in making visible and attempting to resolve the problems of economic and social deprivation, but in apparently bridging the psychological distance between poverty and security through the visual dynamic of documentary photography. In so
doing, the government could claim that, even despite the factual evidence represented in
the images, the economic difference between subject and viewer was secondary to the
metaphoric equality evoked by the photographs. The construction of this ideological
façade is particularly relevant to the way agricultural workers and the rural poor were
represented to a white-collar urban audience.\textsuperscript{164}

One reason RA/FSA photos may have lacked representations of black life was
the concentration on regional needs. Most of the FSA work was done in the South and
sections of the Midwest. Very little attention was given to urban areas and the problems
of immigration or population due to the focus on agricultural relief and reforms in the first
New Deal. Basically, no attention was given to Asians or Native Americans and their
struggles during the Depression. Thus, the kinds of jobs represented in the files were
primarily agrarian and showed little of the lives of working-class blacks or other
minorities and little attention was given to urban problems like strikes, crime, or prejudice
toward outsiders or the ghetto situations of poor people. By 1930 none of the five cities
with the largest Negro populations were in the South.\textsuperscript{165} No attention was given to the
rich cultural legacy of African Americans in the North fostered in music, dance, and
literature that flowed out of Harlem in the 1920s. Neither was much attention given to
moments of black and white solidarity, such as when black and white tenant farmers in
Arkansas formed the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in 1934 to protest the
rampant inequities in the New Deal farm program. It was one of the first acts of
solidarity between blacks and whites and several FSA photographers did capture
moments of the strike, though little publicity was shed on the event.

Nevertheless, RA/FSA photographs continue to present Roosevelt's forgotten
man in the image most familiar and acceptable to Americans in the white-collar class of
the 1930s. The team of photographers working under Roy Stryker's History Section of
the Farm Security Administration provided vivid visual texts which made the forgotten
man no longer an invisible figure of Roosevelt's rhetoric, but a tangible reminder of the
ill-housed, ill-fed, and ill-clothed.

The successes of the RA/FSA photographs division might be measured in the
number of photos which appeared in publications of the 1930s and further still by the

\textsuperscript{164} Ellis, 5.

\textsuperscript{165} Harvard Sitkoff, \textit{A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National
number of current publications using RA/FSA photographs to attract readers. The metaphorical power of these photos seems only to grow, as does the distance in time between the past and the present. Perhaps the most powerful use of FSA photos was their function as tools of legislative persuasion, but a less measurable result of their success might be in how these images reminded white collar (middle) class viewers that things were really not so bad. At least they were not like "those" people. The "otherness" of FSA subjects has continued to be the most pervasive legacy of work produced by FSA photographers. In the end, Roosevelt's rhetoric of bringing them back into the fold must be judged as a failure. The poor of all races and geographic areas remain ill-housed, ill-fed, and ill-clothed into the 21st century, never fully achieving the social status of the common man.
Artworks produced under the Works Progress Administration during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s tenure as President of the United States have been the topic of numerous scholarly books and articles on the history of art. Unlike any other time in American history, the Depression era fostered a synergy between the arts and the federal government. But rather than reiterate the history of the major government relief art programs initiated in the thirties, my intention here is to demonstrate how the murals and sculptures created within them contributed to the discourses fostering a sense of classlessness, of middle classness, and of the common American citizen.

Ultimately, the visual rhetoric found in artworks produced under the Works Progress Administration established a central image of the common man as essentially a white, Protestant, middle-class citizen/worker, thereby co-opting any attention given to others previously left-out of the American national identity. As I have argued in the previous chapters, the rhetoric of the forgotten man quickly merged with the concept of the common man. In this chapter, I intend to show how FDR’s rhetoric about the New
Deal as a new order co-existed with and directly influenced the way artists, working under government sponsorship, created a mythic image of the “average” American as a member of one centralized middle class.

Unlike Farm Security Administration photographs which focused solely on those without employment, public artworks supported by federal art programs took a different, more comprehensive approach, one more obviously consistent with New Deal ideology and FDR’s rhetoric regarding democracy, capitalism, labor, and the average American. Many WPA artworks included carefully constructed themes designed to manifest an idealistic past or a progressive future, because Americans wanted to picture themselves as heroes conquering the present catastrophe and moving toward a utopian future. Individuals may have felt forgotten by their leaders, but images contrary to that feeling could be found in public (government) venues across the country. By conflating images of agricultural and industrial labor, the visual rhetoric found in federal art produced in the 1930s and early 1940s constructed the representative American image as inclusive of both blue and white-collar workers.

The visual depiction of workers included elements of Roosevelt’s rhetoric regarding the “forgotten man” as the average laborer, a man or woman who believed in the American dream and American values. Because Roosevelt’s rhetoric contributed to the concept of aspiring to social mobility through hard work and consumption, Americans came to equate democracy with rising social class status and they enjoyed the notion that “forgotten ones” could easily be brought into the mainstream (constructed as a middle or average class), the constructed norm of a democratic society, by practicing “common” class values. Thus, FDR’s rhetoric was instrumental in establishing the image of America as a classless society, one where people could move freely between classes, but still essentially exist in a centralized position.

This chapter will focus on public works of art produced under two New Deal programs: the Public Works of Art Project (1933-1941), under the Treasury Department, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), specifically the branch known as the Federal Art Project (FAP, 1935-1943). While numerous art programs existed at state and local levels, only the PWAP and WPA/FAP commissioned large scale public mural
paintings and sculptures.\textsuperscript{166} Through those public examples, the rhetorical concept of the forgotten man as a middle-class average American became most apparent. For coherence, I shall refer to the murals and sculpture produced under federal programs simply as divisions of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) since this coincides with how the public came to think of all federal arts programs in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{167}

\textit{Historical Context}

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was one of the most extensive New Deal projects, and had the greatest immediate impact on the nation as a whole.\textsuperscript{168} Many projects sponsored under the WPA were vast, such as the construction of dams or major building projects in urban centers, but one of the more unique aspects of the WPA was its governance of federal and state art programs as a form of unemployment relief. One of the more ubiquitous forms of cultural production during Roosevelt’s administration was the artwork placed in public locations reflecting the New Deal ideals of universal democracy, fair capitalism, and conscientious morality in a style uniquely tied to this period in American art history. Depression-era patronage of the arts and artists via work relief programs was unique in American art history because it was the only time that the federal government supported artists on an equal basis with other professions and the first time it was inclusive regarding gender, race, and social class.

Prior to this time, the function and tradition of (Western) art, at least since the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, had been to question and critique society, particularly government practice and ideology.\textsuperscript{169} The practice of earlier artists was to act as intellectual social commentators whose audience consisted predominantly of an educated elite bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{170} The 1930s represented a challenge to that tradition by making formerly high art accessible to the average citizen. Through WPA arts projects, members of all classes and races could view or participate in artistic productions involving local post

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{166} B. I. Bustard, \textit{A New Deal for the Arts} (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1997), 6, 9.
\textsuperscript{168} Bustard, 7.
\end{flushleft}
office murals, community puppet shows, public statues erected in town centers, musical concerts and dramatic performances, all at no cost and without an education in the arts. As a result, art became socially democratic by catering to more than just the elite class. Placing artistic productions in government venues or civic spaces implied a strong connection to the administration's political rhetoric and agenda for policy reforms. It was the first time too in which American fine artists could be seen as both part of the working-class and as skilled professionals with a productive function in the larger society. Conflating the two identities contributed to the concept of artist/workers as members of both the white-collar and blue-collar classes simultaneously.

Historian William F. McDonald wrote an excellent historical record of the federal arts programs as relief projects wherein he discussed the advantage of such programs to white-collar workers who, too proud to accept charity, felt comfortable applying for work on a relief project. McDonald suggested that examples of class alliances such as this aided other white-collar workers to view relief work as feasible income. Furthermore, the administration's mandate that all projects be worthwhile, drew attention to the perception of artwork as a contribution to social well-being beyond mere decoration or ornament. The administration's concern that artists/workers be professionals assured officials and citizens alike that federal artistic productions were of social value.

The interwar period of American art history is thus unique for its collaboration between government and the arts. But like traditional patrons of the arts, the church and monarchy, the American government had an agenda inherent in its patronage. That agenda contributed to the already present discourses on defining a national character, particularly that of "Americanism." Consequently, embedded in the visual rhetoric found in public murals and sculptures were the messages upholding perceptions of democracy, capitalism, and an equality in social standing enjoyed by all citizens.

This layered perception of American equality suggested that all citizens benefited equally from the tenets of capitalism and democracy. Therefore, they all existed in one central social position: a middle class. As I have argued, the rhetoric of class combined specific concepts of work, the work ethic, and the right to work, into a composite image...

171 Bustard, 21.
172 William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 16-17, 185.
of the average American worker/citizen. In merging these abstract concepts, one particular image emerged as the quintessential American: that of a white, Protestant person of northern European decent. Members of this WASP group most feared that they and their values would be forgotten in the chaos of the times. Hence, the combination of WASP ideals with the interests of artists who sought to project a new social paradigm converged within murals into a quintessential American image. This artistic presentation by WPA muralists made tangible the image of an American character supported frequently in the words of Franklin Roosevelt. Subsequently, the impact of visual images produced and distributed through government-sponsored programs and venues proved vital to establishing a visible representative of Roosevelt's common man.

_The Bureaucratic Structure_

Work relief for artists began on May 12, 1933, when President Roosevelt signed into law the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), which continued President Hoover’s policy of direct monetary relief to the states. The idea of putting artists to work first came to the attention of FDR through his artist friend and former schoolmate, George Biddle. Biddle approached FDR with a program modeled on the Mexican muralist movement arguing that, “Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance.”

Biddle attributed that success to the Mexican government allowing “artists to work at plumber’s wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican Revolution.” From the conversation between Roosevelt and Biddle emerged two separate programs, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP, typically referred to as “The Section”) and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). Under the supervision of the Treasury Department, these two programs were established wherein one would solicit the best possible works through a series of competitions and commissions, and the other would seek to provide relief to unemployed artists. The PWAP was the pilot program and more traditional than the TRAP. The PWAP and its subordinate offices were not a relief project like TRAP. Instead, they awarded commissions on the basis of anonymous competitions.Commissioned works at that time were primarily


[174] Biddle, 268-269.
intended to embellish federal, state, and municipal buildings and parks. Approximately one half of one percent of all new construction was devoted to the decoration of buildings, a practice that remains to this day a part of public building projects.\textsuperscript{175}

As the initial program within the PWAP, the Section of Painting and Sculpture (The Section) established the following guidelines: 1) to secure the best quality art to embellish public buildings; 2) to stimulate the development of American art in general; 3) to employ local talent where possible; 4) to secure the cooperation of the art world in selecting artists for this work; and 5) to encourage competitive project proposals wherever possible, although certain established artists were entitled to the best commissions.\textsuperscript{176}

Edward Bruce, a lawyer and businessman turned professional painter, headed the Section of Painting and Sculpture (starting with the PWAP in 1933 and then for the Section from 1934 until his death in 1942). Bruce’s concept of the government as patron called for its officials to act like a jury. Thus, the Section had final analysis of murals and sculptural work that went up on the walls of new buildings and therefore set the tone and standard for the early projects created under the PWAP. Bruce wanted high quality artists and stressed the importance of a uniquely American art form, one that would highlight the American way of life as it was emerging and bring to American culture a presence distinctly different from its European parentage.\textsuperscript{177} He believed in good drawing, careful observation of nature, and a certain individual approach to aesthetics, all of which followed the tenets of Neo-classicism.\textsuperscript{178} Bruce’s interest in creating and encouraging American scenes with an easily understood iconography echoed the sentiments of American artists such as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton, who also sought to create a uniquely American aesthetic presence. Under Bruce’s guidance “The Section” was made into a national program, working first with museum directors and other professionals in the arts to provide the first form of relief to unemployed artists. It became apparent from the beginning, however, that a focus on relief meant that the


\textsuperscript{176} Belisario R. Contreras, Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art (London: Associated University Presses, 1983), 51.

\textsuperscript{177} McDonald, 117.

most talented artists and those most in financial need were not always one and the same.\footnote{179 McKinzie, 12-13, Contreras, 103.}

The Treasury Relief Art Project complemented the Section of Painting and Sculpture under the PWAP, but the TRAP was specifically designed to commission works for both old and new federal and state buildings. Unfortunately, the TRAP was limited in scope and controlled by larger WPA guidelines which required that 90% of artists hired must come from the relief rolls. Shortly after its establishment it became apparent that the TRAP was not able to accommodate the large number of unemployed artists, so by August 1935 the Federal Art Project Number One (Federal One or FAP, 1935-1943) was founded as part of the WPA program, and the TRAP was dissolved. Originally there were four programs in the FAP specifically devoted to employing musicians, actors, writers, and visual artists. A fifth project was added in November 1935, the Historical and Records Survey Project.\footnote{180 For a more extensive explanation of these programs see W. F. McDonald who wrote the most comprehensive study of the federal art programs and their origins. See also White, McKinzie, Marling, and Conteraras.}

The Federal Art Project was much more committed to artistic freedom than any of the other art programs. Not only was the FAP more overtly democratic in its acceptance of new materials, techniques, and styles, but it extended its function to educational public service messages about prenatal care, fire prevention, nutrition, sexual diseases, and other social problems.\footnote{181 Baskerville and Willett, 179.} The FAP also allowed greater diversity in whom it hired, providing minorities and women equal opportunities to participate and gain professional status by working on the relief programs.\footnote{182 McDonald, 172-174.} Because of the non-discriminatory hiring practices of FAP directors, a generation of black artists, including Romare Bearden, Samuel Brown, and Jacob Lawrence, and women artists such as Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, Louise Nevelson, and Lucienne Bloch, all got their start as professional artists. Future abstractionists such as Jackson Pollock, Marc Rothko, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Clifford Still, and William De Kooning also found support, both economically and aesthetically, by working on government relief programs.\footnote{183 Sitkoff, 70-71, Baskerville and Willett, 180.}

Holger Cahill, a writer, museum curator, and art expert, was hired to head the Federal Art Project and oversee the establishment and management of regional art
centers. Together, he and Edward Bruce organized and articulated the goals of federal arts programs and then guided their specific directions.

As head of the FAP, Cahill’s strategy involved integrating the artist and art into society. Cahill had been influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey regarding art as experience, and he successfully applied those theories to the FAP. As one of his goals, he hoped to revive the integration of art as an experience into the life of the community by returning art to a conscious social connection rather than “art for art’s sake.” Thus, predicated on the belief that art should not remain the preserve of a privileged class, Cahill sought to merge fine arts with fine crafts and subsequently accepted greater diversity in style than did the Section. Cahill once wrote, “The importance of an integration between the fine arts and the practical arts has been recognized from the first by the Federal Art Project, as an objective desirable in itself and as a means of drawing together major aesthetic forces in this country.” Cahill’s pet project was the Index of American Design, which would become a historical record of architectural and graphic design in American history and American scenes. Like Bruce, Cahill encouraged artists to produce narratives drawn from American history. The Index was designed to serve as a resource for artists to research “whatever might be special about American, pioneer, or democratic culture.” By producing this document, Cahill meant to enrich American culture by illuminating its past. In an FAP memo, Cahill articulated his philosophy of the artist’s connection with society and how art centers should be an “integrating educational force” in the community. Accordingly, Cahill asked his regional staff members to consider the following questions:

What is the population of the community in relation to art center attendance? What are the major industries of your community and how are the activities at the art center related to those industries? What efforts are made to interest industrial workers? What is being done educationally to clarify the relationship between the folk arts and the machine arts? What is the total of sponsors’ contributions? Does it come from individuals or organizations? What are some human interest episodes that reveal the character of community participation? The

---

names and political affiliations of the newspapers in your community carrying stories on the activities of the project? Which activities are most popular? Least popular? What is being done to stimulate active as opposed to visual participation in the work of the center? How is the average visitor converted from a spectator into a participant? To what extent has the work of the art center served to revive indigenous cultural patterns that heretofore lay dormant?²⁸⁷

A clear example of how pervasive Cahill’s philosophy became among regional arts administrators is demonstrated in a letter written by Daniel Defenbacher, head of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, to Nan Sheets, Director of the Oklahoma Experimental Art Gallery in Oklahoma City, reprimanding her for using the term “museum” instead of the more ordinary phrase “community art center.” His objection seemed based on the belief that the word ‘museum’ was too highbrow for what Defenbacher saw as the FAP mission.²⁸⁸ John Franklin White writes in Art in Action: American Art Centers and The New Deal that:

The mission was always to bring art to “the people” but the philosophy behind it was still steeped in elitist ideology about what was high culture and training people to accept it as defined by the upper classes… to bring people into a certain view of what is culture and what is art.²⁸⁹

As national arts projects directors, both Cahill and Bruce had considerable influence over the agenda of their programs and ultimately how art and culture were defined to regional directors and New Deal administrators. Edward Bruce’s aesthetic judgment originated in the Aristotelian definition of art as that which lifts the spirit to a higher plane of comprehension. Cahill’s view of art, though heavily influenced by Dewey and Enlightenment philosophers, was similar. An editorial by John K. Sherman entitled “Art Faces the 40’s,” appearing in the Minneapolis Tribune in April 1940, illustrated how cultural definition was being disseminated through art centers. Sherman noted that “Art is being made a more vital part of daily life, and there is impressive growth in the capacity of the average man and woman to appreciate major cultural values of the society in which they are factors.”²⁹⁰ Clearly, the message that art was for everyone got

²⁸⁸ White, 64.
²⁸⁹ White, 64.
²⁹⁰ White, 22.
through to the public, no doubt due to Cahill’s efforts to remove art from the modernist emphasis on individuals and “art for art’s sake.” His was not the only voice in this matter, and Cahill’s ideals stayed rather consistent with concurrent attitudes in other disciplines such as literature and film. Moreover, as writer and critic Thomas Craven once wrote, “‘art for arts sake’ could not thrive in American society…” because, he argued, “[i]f Americans were to have an indigenous expression, it would have to come from strong native impulses, simple ideas, and the popular taste.”

Cahill agreed with Craven’s assessment and thought that contemporary painting of the thirties, with its emphasis on social and collective expression, gave a fresh and vital interpretation to the American way of life.

Of course, Cahill found a great deal of support in many of the prevailing social discourses, particularly those emphasizing “Americanism.” Following Bruce’s emphasis on American scenes for the artworks commissioned by the PWAP, Cahill also stressed the importance of depicting local images and American narratives. He, like Bruce, encouraged artists to search for a “usable past.” Both Cahill’s *Index of American Design* and FDR’s rhetoric about national unity and the “common sense” of American citizens reflected an interest in American history as the source of an American character. As noted in Chapter Three, Roy Stryker, head of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) History Project, encouraged a similar attitude. The concept of an American “past” became a primary subject for artworks in all of the government-sponsored art programs, as did the search for a “native” history. Nonetheless, much of the visual rhetoric established by New Deal artists was strongly tied to foreign sources, particularly those of Mexico, Germany, and the Soviet Union.

**Foreign Influences**

Though revolution may have been “in the air” by the early 1930s, public attitudes had also turned more reflective. Revolutions in Mexico and Russia, along with the national tumult occurring in Italy and Germany after World War I, had stimulated a psychological turn inward which fostered desire for social unity and a common national identity. The people of Mexico, the Soviet Union, and Germany, all under new leadership, demonstrated renewed interest in their cultural and national identities. Many

---

192 Contreras, 23.
193 McKinzie, 23.
of these attempts focused on national folklore and mythology. Leaders of all three countries understood the power of art as a tool in organizing and distributing ideological messages. In Germany, Adolph Hitler’s agenda made use of the arts as a primary form of ideological propaganda in constructing national identity. New governments in Mexico and the Soviet Union also made deliberate attempts to form a “style” representative of the people or the state and not the bourgeoisie.

By the time Roosevelt’s administration created relief programs for unemployed artists, these foreign examples of the marriage between government and artistic endeavors were well established. Not surprisingly, American interest in patronizing the arts shared certain characteristics found elsewhere in state-supported artistic alliances. For example, the Mexican revolution of 1910 and the Soviet revolution of 1917 produced particular forms of visual rhetoric which were clearly understood as ideological propaganda designed to educate the masses about the ideals of the newly formed governments. Both revolutions promised to provide more equitable participation among all members of their societies, but from very different ideological perspectives. In the Soviet Union Marxist attention to the value of mass production coupled with equitable distribution of wealth created a government-sponsored body of art directed specifically at representing the goals and ideals of the new social order. Mexican artists too were influenced by Marxist concepts, which they illustrated as a desire to create a collective voice – one that would speak for “the people.” Art for the masses specifically rejected the tenets of “high” art and classicism, though it kept the standards of Renaissance perspective. According to cultural theorist Paul von Blum, “high art is that which is divorced from real life…only available to the affluent for whom ‘culture’ is often little more than another commodity sold via the consumption orientation of modern capitalism.”

The renewed emphasis on “the people” removed art from its association with an elite and redefined how culture was constructed. Allowing art to represent and “speak” to the masses diminished the previous function of art as a way of separating classes. If everyone was capable of producing and accessing art, then anyone could participate as an equal in forming a culture.

---

195 von Blum, 3.
Mexican artists Jose Clement Orosco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siquieros together revived the Renaissance practice of displaying political propaganda in public venues using the traditional technique of fresco painting. Of the three, Rivera was recognized as the foremost artist of the ‘revolutionary’ style and Mexican nationalistic iconography.¹⁹⁶ His keen understanding of political power through visual imagery made his own murals much more powerful than the others, and he soon became an artist of international repute. Rivera had studied art in Europe and was quite familiar with the history and culture of artistic influence, understanding well the links between art and government.¹⁹⁷ It is therefore ironic that as a card-carrying Communist, Rivera was commissioned to paint murals for some of the most wealthy and powerful American capitalists of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Thus, by the mid-1930s, his work and philosophies were familiar to many American artists.

(Fig. 19) *Detroit Industry* (detail), Diego Rivera  
(Fig. 20) *Dia de las Flores* (1925), Diego Rivera

Rivera’s thematic content and aesthetic style most influenced American artists employed by New Deal art programs. His large and monumental figures, accentuated “native” characteristics of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Using bright vibrant colors to suggest vitality and strength, he emphasized native physical features and coloring

¹⁹⁷ Wolfe, 54-56.
rather than the European features of Mestizos who comprised Mexico’s ruling class. Rivera also composed his works in shallow pictorial space, merging figures with the environment to symbolically illustrate the integration of Mexico’s people and land while making subtle reference to his knowledge of modernism in the arts. His narrative subject matter about Mexican history, pride of the people in their heritage and folklore, and heroic feats and individuals made legendary through native mythology or as champions of the peasant class, served as an important example to U.S. artists. Rivera’s subject matter brought the forgotten ones of Mexico to the forefront of Mexico’s cultural and political revolutions. American artists hoped to do the same for the forgotten ones in their country.

American artists often looked to their foreign peers for inspiration and then adapted their knowledge to form a style accepted as the most “general” and most easily accessible to the masses. Separation of “high” art as an enlightened realm available only to the “cultured” initiates was both rejected and, in a way, embraced by WPA artists. While the attempt to make art both for and by “the people” was rhetorically appropriate, it was also hoped that “the people” would somehow be elevated in the process. Not surprisingly, one goal of the PWAP and FAP administrators Edward Bruce and Holger Cahill was to educate people to understand art in the middle-class ideal which included the concept of hastening upward social mobility by becoming cultured: i.e., educated, polished, and refined.

Given the presence of Mexican muralists in the U.S., the ideology behind their work entered American discourses in the arts and soon even the general population began to see murals as the “people’s art.” As previously noted, the success of Rivera and the Mexican muralists first came to the attention of FDR through his friend and former schoolmate, George Biddle. When Biddle wrote to Roosevelt about the impact of the Mexican muralist movement, he recorded that FDR responded with great interest but didn’t want “a lot of young enthusiasts painting Lenin’s head on the Justice Building.” FDR’s reference was made about a portrait of Lenin which Diego Rivera had painted in a mural commissioned for the newly-erected Rockefeller Center in New York City.

198 Wolfe, 169.
200 Contreras, 84.
201 as quoted in Contreras, 51, from The New York Times, May 1933.
When John D. Rockefeller learned of the portrait he immediately demanded that Rivera paint over it or the mural would be destroyed. Rivera refused and the mural was soon demolished. Roosevelt feared that artists on relief might also use art for political or personal comment, but Biddle assured him that young artists “would be eager to express these [American, i.e. democratic and capitalist] ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government’s cooperation.” FDR passed Biddle’s letter on to Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, and by the spring of 1933 the first New Deal art program was established.

In addition to Mexican inspiration, undoubtedly influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, Soviet and German artists devised forms of state propaganda centered on the proletariat or the “common” people, as the country’s center of strength. Many American literary artists were also influenced by Marx and expressed their sentiments in public discourses critiquing U.S. economic and class paradigms. Authors drew upon Marx’s rhetoric of the proletariat to identify themselves and their protagonists as part of the community of workers victimized by the failure of capitalism. Rather than identifying with an intellectual and elite class as did their predecessors, writers and many visual artists of the 1930s cited their own working-class backgrounds as source material for their work. Association with the “working class” placed them neatly among “the people.”

202 Biddle, 268-269.
203 Dickstein, 233.
on their employment in government art programs also identified more readily with the working class since they were removed from the traditional cultural pedestal of artists as eccentric characters. They felt free to become members of the proletariat, common laborers like everyone else, and integral parts of society.\textsuperscript{204} 

A similar form of downward social mobility occurred with former members of the white-collar class who suddenly found themselves on equal footing with all other unemployed workers. The conflation of these classes into an abstract proletariat was easy to construct for artists already skilled at creating fictional representations of reality. In the process, the common worker gained attention as the heart and soul of the U.S. Artists might literally have borrowed this concept from the words of FDR. As he stated in a November 1940 campaign address in Cleveland, Ohio: “Always the heart and soul of our country will be the heart and soul of the common man.” Roosevelt was surely aware of the success of Mexican, Soviet and German propaganda through the arts and also through the use of Marxist language. He must also have been keenly aware of how well Hitler used the rhetoric of national unity to rally Germans out of their own economic and cultural depression in the early 1930s. So when George Biddle suggested that the government employ artists as a form of economic relief, FDR must have also understood how well the arts might benefit his administration.\textsuperscript{205} 

For many artists, the New Deal rhetoric of reform preordained a new, more inclusive, social order. Many artists had a utopian vision of the future and believed the rhetoric of reform would result in a new social order and they attempted to project their optimism through their work on WPA/FAP commissions.\textsuperscript{206} Mural titles such as \textit{The Role of the Immigrant in the Industrial Development of America} (in the dining room on Ellis Island), \textit{The Underground Railroad, Indian Village}, and \textit{The Negro’s Contribution in the Social Development of America} demonstrate this hopeful attitude, despite their tendency to mythologize non-white Americans. One wonders, however, how artists thought stereotypical depictions such as these could inspire a transformed image of racial and ethnic social positions?

\textsuperscript{204} Contreras, 40. 
\textsuperscript{205} McKinzie, 6. Roosevelt had already put artists on the state payroll while governor of New York state. 
\textsuperscript{206} Contreras, 87-90.
It is no wonder that the socialist and communist rhetoric spreading through Europe at the beginning of the century eventually had an impact on the American populace and government leaders desperate for some form of economic and social remedy to the chaos of unemployment and drought in the farmlands. Mistrust of the capitalist order, especially after World War I and the 1929 stock market crash, contributed to sympathetic feelings towards revolution among some American artists and intellectuals. This is one reason Roosevelt commented as he did about employing artists who might paint Lenin's head in a mural. Americans’ fear of European fascism or communism was not so much based on what was happening in Europe as it was on fear of the principles of those ideologies – the lack of economic competition, individualism and localism, which were considered so necessary to the American character.\footnote{Marling, \textit{Wall-to-Wall America}, 32.} Still, Americans did look to Soviet and European examples for alternative models of political economy.\footnote{Baskerville and Willett, 10.} While the U.S. government was careful not to profess communist or socialist ideas to the people, government officials did nevertheless understand that the verbal and visual languages which expressed these concepts were of great import to rallying the populace. Hence, the Roosevelt administration used the emphasis placed on the rhetoric and representation of the common, average, “middle” American to great advantage.
The governments of the Soviet Union, Mexico, and Germany also functioned as important resources for unifying populations into a common nation by creating one national identity. All sought a connection to the past with artists trying to validate or glorify current events by linking them to the history and tradition of their nations. Thus, in all foreign examples we find similar themes and styles, such as labor, a theme common to all three nations and the U.S. Since mechanized labor was at the heart of industrializing societies and created the most threat to life as agrarian people knew it, images of progress (machines and/or industrial plants) dominated many cultural representations of accomplishment. Rural themes too were consistent among the countries since all were in the process of moving from an agrarian economic base to an industrial one and were suffering from similar hardships in the transition.209

(Fig. 23) *Men and Wheat* (1939), Joe James

(Fig. 24) color sketch for *Electrification* (1940), C. David Stone Martin

---

Though similarities between national arts programs existed in the 1930s, there were important distinctions among them. Unique to American artists was the New Deal's emphasis on preserving capitalism and democracy. They constructed the concept of the common man in WPA murals and sculptures to reflect the specifically American ideal of democracy, and the artists themselves often supported the idea that art should be democratic. This was particularly true for printmakers, who rejected the notion of limiting the number of prints made so that only an elite class might own original artwork. As FAP printmaker Russell Limback explained, artists wanted their work to reach the common people and not “stock market-minded dealers and collectors.”

Ralph Graham, a commercial artist working for the WPA/FAP in Chicago, said of the posters produced under the project, “Through the efforts of the WPA/FAP, the artist and the public have come to know each other and to realize the definite need of one for the other. The poster has been responsible in large part for this phase of common understanding because it has reached so many people.” Graham’s thoughts reflected the sentiments of many WPA/FAP artists. Most had a strong sense of art as a benevolent form of social communication.

One primary difference between visual rhetoric formed by U.S. artists and that of their German and Soviet contemporaries was the Americans' conscious avoidance of the “cult of the leader” phenomenon present in both European countries. Both Hitler and Stalin had encouraged the iconization of their personal images in the public arts, whereas FDR very astutely formulated his image as a “man of the people.”

(Fig. 25) FDR on a fishing trip (left) and with Fala (right) in 1943

210 See McDonald 354-356 for a comparison of Mexican muralists, Rivera in particular, and U.S. muralists.
211 as quoted in O’Connor, The New Deal Art Projects, 19.
Roosevelt understood the power of images only too well. He was careful to control visual images of himself so as not to be seen by the public as an incapacitated “cripple,” due to his bout with polio which had left him in a wheelchair. He made sure to be photographed wearing outfits that would present him as an average American, unlike Stalin and Hitler who wore military uniforms to demonstrate their leadership and command of “the people.” FDR also chose clothing which coincided with his spoken rhetoric. By changing hats he could appear in one moment to belong to the white-collar world of management or in another as a working-class family man wearing a fedora. He also chose to be seen in casual attire such as sweaters or without a suit jacket, indicating that he was indeed “one of the people.” Roosevelt wished to be seen and heard as the voice of “the people,” particularly for those supposedly forgotten by previous administrations.

WPA/FAP artwork differed from German and Soviet art in other important ways as well. For example, American artists’ avoidance of nudity may have to do with the Puritan heritage of the U.S., but more likely, it was part of the rejection of European aesthetics. More importantly, the ideology behind U.S. and European sponsorship of the arts was quite contrary; German artists were soliciting young men to engage in war-like activities, Soviet artists adhered to communist goals and Mexican artists implied peasant revolt, while American artists were concerned with inclusive programs for social reform.213

It was clear to all those involved in state-sponsored American art that images and themes must be understood by the majority of the population, not only to justify the use of public monies but more clearly because it was the only way propaganda could effectively be disseminated. While the U.S. government continually denied any interest in propagandistic messages, the system of approval by local community civic committees all but assured the portrayal of appropriate “American” messages to its citizens.214 Roosevelt's administration carefully avoided placing too many editorial restrictions on artists working under New Deal projects, wary of infringing upon First Amendment rights. Thus, the American government never mandated realism as did leaders in both the Soviet Union and Germany.

---

213 Guttsman, 16.
Even when U.S. officials accepted abstract designs or images, they were assured to be lacking in any political or negative commentary on government policy or practices. One example of government control was Rockwell Kent’s mural commissioned by the Department of Justice entitled *Mail Service in the Tropics* (ca. 1936).

(Fig. 26) *Mail Service in the Tropics* (1937), Rockwell Kent

In a letter held by a central figure Kent added an inscription in an Eskimo dialect, which read, “To the people of Puerto Rico, our friend! Let us change chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free.” Treasury officials were disturbed by this message, believing it to encourage revolution in Puerto Rico. Kent offered to change the inscription to a quote from Abraham Lincoln’s inaugural address, “May you preserve and win that freedom and equality in which lies the promise of its true happiness.” But this inscription was also rejected in favor of what the Treasury officials suggested: “To commemorate the far-flung front of the United States Postal Service.”

In the end, Kent refused to paint anything on the letter and left the image blank. The blank letter, however, retained a tension appearing as resistance to U.S. presence, represented by a man on horseback delivering the mail. In the foreground of this painting appear a group of four young women and a child. With arms raised in protest, their bodies twist and turn away from the man on horseback. In the hand of the center-most female is the letter which Kent has left blank. It is this small, but potent, image that seems to signify reproach by the women. One can only speculate at how local

---

215 Bustard, 90. McKinzie, 63.
community members would have interpreted this image, but Kent’s depiction of the relationship between the U.S. and the “Tropics” left little room for sentimentality.

Another example of government censorship occurred in response to murals painted for the Coit Tower in San Francisco. On a tour of the soon-to-be-opened tower murals, media representatives were horrified to notice what they deemed "communist" propaganda. An image of one worker illustrates him reading the Western Worker, a communist weekly, while on the library shelves behind him are painted books by Marx, Erskine Caldwell and other notable proletarian authors. The media representatives were so adamant in their calls for dismissal of the offending images, that the artists were required to paint them out of the visual narratives. There were many other examples of this form of artist/patron battle over word and image which essentially resulted in a form of censorship and ideological control over what was produced under government sponsorship.216

Like their Mexican peers, American muralists chose subjects that looked either to the agricultural past or the industrial future of the U.S. While conflating the rhetoric of “the people “ with FDR’s rhetoric of the common ones, they rarely showed members of the upper (non-worker) class because these people were believed not to contribute to the process or production of capital. Based on Marxist logic, this class was not thought to be of value in restoring the economy. The ruling class or aristocracy were not laborers, so any celebration of their images would have been antithetical to FDR’s goals.

Roosevelt needed to convince workers of their intrinsic value by honoring them as the heart and soul of the country, which indeed they were. But their actual necessity to the structure of capitalism would have given workers tremendous power if only they had understood it, especially where strikes or labor demands were concerned. Fortunately for the ruling class, giving workers “virtual” power (via visual imagery) did not translate to “real” or actual power. Thus, the arts were necessary for FDR because they could communicate his ideology, and also channel dissent by taming would-be revolutionary artists by giving them something to create and messages to express. Artistic programs and expressions could also serve as a form of surveillance on the nation, since local and state communities had communication with Washington via Bruce, Cahill, and Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau. As it turned out, New Deal

216 McKinzie, 24. Also see Marling, Wall-to-Wall America for more information on censorship.
artists had some opportunity to re-order the societal conceptions of the nation and community, but, more often than not, race, class, and gender representations perpetuated the social order as it was understood by the white middle class. Assumed to accurately mirror the natural order of things, these representations went unquestioned by many.

While the administration never mandated the style of artwork done for New Deal art programs, there was nevertheless a particularity derived from several cultural sources: the economic and psychological aspects of the Depression, the national emphasis on Americanism, the Mexican muralist movement, and a combination of contemporary aesthetic movements, particularly Social Realism and an American Regionalism practiced by a growing number of artists. The Depression fostered a growing awareness of social and economic ills which resulted, for many, in either a reflective psychology or a revolutionary activism motivated by optimism for new beginnings. The idealism of the Roosevelt administration and rhetoric about a “new deal” for Americans supported both of these reactions, but especially the optimistic outlook about America’s past and future. Thus, the kinds of visual rhetoric that pervaded WPA public artworks were tied to the promotion of democracy, freedom, unity, fortitude, morality, and mental and physical strength.

**Context, Style, and Content**

Perhaps because Americans were searching for “material” evidence of the nation’s core strengths and accomplishments, artists of the 1930s made a deliberate attempt to reject the 19th century academic use of allegory and demanded that representation had to be real. Inspired by the documentary “truths” presented by FSA photographers and the work of ideological foreign artists like Diego Rivera, WPA/FAP artists created their own idealized version of American history as well as America’s future. It was, however, difficult to accurately reflect the truth of American history regarding the country’s indigenous people and the contributions of immigrants and African American slaves as elements of a “usable past.”

Originally introduced during the First World War, the notion of a usable past was part of a larger discourse on Americanism and American achievement. As the country struggled with the many changes in population, customs, the economy, urbanization,

---

217 Contreras, 25.
feminism, racism, and separation from European heritage, pervasive American cultural myths grew in importance to the establishment of a national identity. With so many diverse perspectives vying for attention, historical representations of the yeoman farmer and the new industrial workers seemed a logical premise of American identity from which to unify disparities. By relating to the national emphasis on abstract character traits such as resourcefulness, the entrepreneurial spirit of pioneers, and the Christian work ethic, members of the disenfranchised classes could claim possession of American values. After all, was it not a pioneering spirit that fed industrialization, the work ethic of immigrants which built great urban centers, and the resourcefulness and sweat of different racial groups which fed and clothed the nation? No one could feel their contributions were forgotten when these were understood in such abstract terms. Idealization of these characteristics was easily converted into the emerging representation of the forgotten (common) man, since farmers and factory workers alike suffered the effects of the Great Depression. These groups, along with immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, could easily identify with historic characterizations of the heroic worker, as well as with the idea of being members of a proletariat.

Unlike European and Asian concepts of fixed social orders, Americans viewed social order as a flexible progression of broad vertical steps with ascendance accessible to all citizens if they met acceptable moral and work ethic codes. Thus, the connection between money and labor is important to keep in mind when discussing social class and it is vital to understanding the representations of class in visual imagery. After the Industrial Revolution, class difference and social hierarchies became more clearly defined by types of labor and the economic ability to consume. We see this transition represented in the images of the worker and types of labor in American murals and sculptures done for public display at the turn of the century.

During the transition from an agrarian economy to one based on industry, pre-industrial workers became symbols of a vanishing culture, and representations of them soon became collector’s pieces for middle-class patrons.\textsuperscript{218} Prior to this time, images of workers and the working class rarely appeared in visual art forms because they were considered an unfit subject for representation. The Depression of the 1930s merely

\textsuperscript{218} Dabakis, 19.
revived this movement by once again elevating workers to heroic status as noble and worthy subjects of depiction.

WPA muralists, however, illustrated a much more romanticized version of the American past and future—portraying them as filled with hope and prosperity. Muralists tried to trace a national lineage. Of course, artists working on public mural projects were not given complete freedom to express ideas because administrators seeking to reach the largest number of viewers encouraged “realistic” or recognizable imagery of a non-controversial nature. Portrayal of tensions between labor and management or agrarian and industrial workers was not encouraged. Neither were depictions of unsafe working conditions, child labor, or racial prejudice acceptable to most community administrations. Total freedom to choose subject matter and style might have implied official support of revolutionary art, and the administration clearly did not want that.219 Officials tended to encourage subjects of a didactic or idyllic nature, something that drew from the past, something spectators could hold on to and cherish. Consequently, embedded in the WPA/FAP projects was the goal of documenting American history.220 Cahill hoped to effectively use certain elements of the past in order to give people a reason to look forward: a sense of hope for the future.221 In doing so, Cahill inadvertently encouraged the emphasis on WASP history and on presenting revised versions of Native American, African American and other ethnic histories. These revisions constructed by WPA/FAP artists fit a utopian vision of a nation now in harmony with its past and uniformly looking forward to its productive future. Artists depicted these sentiments rhetorically through the style, content, and context of their work.

219 Contreras, 44.
220 As such, the WPA established the National Archives, catalogued historic buildings, wrote state guides, recorded folk songs, and revived regional crafts.
221 Bustard, 18.
Many of the murals painted for government buildings were highly imbued with allegorical meaning stemming, in part, from the writings of Karl Marx, who linked the product of one’s labor to the value of one’s being. The attention Marx brought to the dichotomous relationship between worker/producer and owner/profiteer had an extraordinary impact on conceptions of society and civilization. Marx’s philosophy had already impacted the nature of sculptural representation in late 19th century as turmoil between laborers and industrialists had drawn attention to the plight of many American industrial workers as well as to the nation’s changing economy. The worker became mythologized in terms of character and solid connections to nature, the land, the soil, the blood of the earth and, by association, the nation as a whole. Rural themes symbolized the purity, wholesomeness and strength of the nation.\(^{222}\) Artistic developments in Mexico, Germany, and the Soviet Union had each elevated the symbolic status of peasants to a new level of allegorical importance in both visual and oral rhetoric.

As with the Soviet Union and Mexico, images of workers proved vital to the New Deal government’s propaganda. Not only did workers represent the inclusion of the common man in the American Dream, but the visual record of people happily employed in meaningful labor reminded workers that they were not forgotten. Of course, this allowed spectators to identify themselves with the “forgotten ones.” In fostering this

\(^{222}\) O’Connor, *The New Deal Arts Projects*, 37. A letter written to Edward Bruce by Henry Varnum Poor regarding the mural on Social Security for the Interior Department Building in Washington D.C., Poor explains how subjects should be of "simple incidents, or places, or people, or conditions of living . . .,” 37.
relationship, the imagery of middle-class labor was easily conflated with that of working-class labor, and together they became one "common" working class; gaining heroism and prestige in the process. The merging of social classes through labor embodied part of the ideological myth stemming from Roosevelt’s rhetoric about national unity and the preservation of democracy. In a September 6, 1936 speech, FDR argued for equality among the classes, not in terms of wealth redistribution as some of his opponents argued, but in terms of opportunity and economic stability:

In other countries the relationship of employer and employee has been more or less accepted as a class relationship not readily to be broken through. In this country we insist, as an essential of the American way of life, that the employer-employee relationship should be one between free men and equals. . . . We insist that labor is entitled to as much respect as property. . . .The average man must have that twofold opportunity if we are to avoid the growth of a class-conscious society in this country. . . . All American workers, brain workers and manual workers alike, and all the rest of us whose well-being depends on theirs, know that our needs are one in building an orderly economic democracy in which all can profit and in which all can be secure from the faulty economic direction (9/6/1936).

The attention FDR gave to social and economic concerns was of great import to calming any sparks of revolution simmering in the population. In another 1936 speech, Roosevelt spoke directly about the need to modify class differences and inequalities which might lead to violence. He said:

We were against revolution. Therefore we waged war against those conditions which make revolutions—against those resentments and inequalities which breed them. In America in 1933 the people did not attempt to remedy wrongs by overthrowing their institutions. Americans were made to realize that wrongs could and would be set right within their institutions (1936).

While not directly naming the many political factions vying for reform such as the communist and socialist parties, or to labor union members, FDR made it clear that he was aware of the need for institutional change, but was clearly in charge of directing how that change might occur. His grasp of foreign revolutions was certainly astute as was his understanding of the appeal proletarian social movements had to suffering and unemployed Americans.
Social Consciousness and Visual Rhetoric

American artists were certainly aware of the socially conscious artistic movements abroad, and many responded to the psychological tumult of the Depression with a social consciousness of their own. This trend permeated movies, dance, theater, literature, music, and the visual arts. It was really the first time American artists had the freedom to publicly criticize the institutions of government and high art, outside the realm of political cartoons or select artistic circles. Those employed by the federal programs, however, could say little about the root causes of the Depression or of the poverty as had FSA photographers. Artists working for the government hardly ever made their work overtly political, despite the fact that so many identified themselves as communists or socialists, or from the working classes most affected by the Depression. Unlike many Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers who attempted to portray the present poverty and hardship as resulting from a failed past, or as commentary on a failed economic system, artists working for WPA programs denied the present harsh reality in favor of a bucolic ideal. More restricted by administrators, WPA artists could not criticize capitalism or the folly of political and economic policies which led to the Depression as could FSA photographers working for Roy Stryker. However, as will be argued below, many WPA artists often tried to insinuate some kind of political statement because they felt passionately about their art and wanted their creations to have social meaning.

Artists who applied for work in either the PWAP or the FAP projects had certain commonalities which reflected their knowledge of contemporary issues in art and social discourses. Most supported socialism to some degree, the extremes of which became evident when studying the broader range of American art from the 1920s through the 1940’s. Social Realism, as an aesthetic movement, was already a pre-eminent force in visual arts prior to the 1930s, and most artists were familiar with the Mexican muralists who revolutionized the concept of socially conscious visual art. The Mexican muralists’ deliberate attention to proletarian concerns and their emphasis on Mexico’s...
indigenous people and folklore strongly influenced American artists. And the importance of visual rhetoric used by governments abroad, especially those in Germany and the Soviet Union, also served as examples of the possible marriage between arts and government for U.S. artists. Consequently, many of them sought to integrate art into society and believed that the U.S. government supported that view.\(^{226}\)

Certainly, Cahill’s vision of art benefiting society could be interpreted as an opportunity for artists to merge their knowledge and skills with the goals of national leadership. Cahill felt that the idea behind the WPA/FAP projects was to enhance collectivism, not individualism; he encouraged work which embodied an “art for every man” focus. Therefore, while abstract art was accepted in some WPA/FAP commissions, the dominant style of artistic production remained representational, developing a similar aesthetic quality to the representational work of artists in Mexico and the Soviet Union.

According to Francis O’Connor, Cahill rejected abstract art, for the most part, because it was art which was concerned with itself.\(^ {227}\) Abstract art also meant “modernism,” which, for some, meant the decline of ethics, morality, and tradition, and was altogether antisocial behavior. So while Cahill and others stressed the importance of positive perspectives of the American past and future, any references to the avant-garde were discouraged.\(^ {228}\)

Though many artists working for the WPA/FAP later became famous for their work as Abstract Expressionists, the odd juxtapositions and irrational compositions of European cubism and the emergence of Surrealism, another contemporary art movement of the 1930s and 1940s, provided a means of solving the immediate difficulty of presenting subjects of both past and present in one composition. Cubism had already revolutionized the concept of linear space on a flat surface by drawing attention to the canvas as a planar surface. Freed from the necessity to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane, artists challenged preconceived notions of form by deconstructing objects to a certain level of abstraction. Surrealism brought a return to form, but dismissed the logic of linear perspective and temporality. What artists

\(^{226}\) Baigell, *The American Scene*, 43.
\(^{227}\) O’Connor, *Art For the Millions*, 18.
\(^{228}\) McKinzie, 57.
synthesized from these sources and their academic training as realists was the perfect combination of form and content, which they applied to their work on WPA projects.\textsuperscript{229}

Creating a visual narrative blending the agrarian past with the idealized industrial future became possible if one created a fictional moment in time. Though the present reality of the Depression rarely appeared in WPA/FAP artworks, there was an implied present moment in the meeting of past and future made visible in public murals. It was an idealized version of the present which depicted a functioning and easy transition from the bygone agrarian economy to the industrial economy of the future. Moreover, many public artworks produced under government programs in the thirties have a timeless quality which mixes the past with the present in a surreal environment. This is apparent in scenes juxtaposing agricultural and industrial labor, or mixing such images as craft, blacksmithing for instance, and an industrial worker on an assembly line. Viewing these images in the same context established a mythical unison and similarity in goals and ideology. Such murals as those entitled \textit{Early Mail Service and the Construction of Railroads}, by Philip Guston for Commerce, Georgia, and \textit{The Family—Industry and Agriculture}, by Harry Sternberg, for Ambler, Pennsylvania, rhetorically linked the “usable” and idyllic past with reference to a prosperous future. These links were used frequently to illustrate the strengths of the American character and to make all forms of labor equally heroic, thereby assuring farmers and craftsmen that they were not among the forgotten ones. The marriage of agrarian/artisan labor with that of industry appeared most often in murals in the Midwest where the agrarian way of life was most tenuous. In examples such as \textit{Local Industry}, for Franklin, Indiana, by Jean Swiggett, \textit{Industrial Activity of the City}, Higginsville, Missouri, by Jac T. Bowen and \textit{Farm and Mill}, by Herschel Levit for Louisville, Ohio, compositional choices rendered it possible to resolve the disparity in subject matter.

\textsuperscript{229} McKinzie, 106-108.
The avant-garde movements of Cubism and Surrealism might have offered compositional possibilities to government artists, but their primary influences remained the peer movements of Social Realism and Regionalism. Social Realism, a particular school of painting, tended to picture the negative aspects of life under capitalism. Subjects like labor strife, the suffering of workers and the poor, and the greed of the wealthy epitomized topics of Social Realists’ work. This meant their subjects were readily recognizable objects and events found in the everyday world. They also rejected the focus on spectacular historic events or the exotic and romanticized locations of Neo-classicism, which most artists had been trained to do.

Stylistically, Social Realist artists rejected the clean lines and soft shades of neoclassicism, concentrating instead on a less refined, more painterly image. Deliberately coarse, brash, and raw, artists intended to reflect an attitude consistent with their perception of the working class. The 19th century iconography of work and workers as masculine was well established by this time and the image of women working in domestic service continued to linger despite the reality of labor in the early 20th century. These narrative qualities and representational style of Social Realism suggested ways WPA artists might create artistry accessible to the average viewer.

---

230 von Blum, 2-3.
The acerbic narratives of Social Realism did not blend well with the federally-funded art projects mission, nor with the Roosevelt administration’s desire to illustrate scenes of American life and history. So while Social Realist artists tended to be activists and longed to engage in biting commentary on social issues, those working for the government were typically restricted to less controversial subject matter. Leaders of the WPA/FAP projects were adamant that they had no propagandist agenda toward the iconography of works from their sections, and for the most part that was true, but project managers and local committees frequently argued over control of subject matter.\(^{231}\) WPA artists typically avoided scandalous or political matters such as labor strikes, child labor, racial crimes (such as lynching), unsafe working conditions, etc., either because they themselves chose not to depict these topics, or more likely because local officials in charge of administering the relief programs held strong opinions on what should and should not represent their locality.\(^{232}\) In the midst of economic crisis people wanted to see the world put right again. So, like FSA photographers and foreign artists, WPA artists portrayed the poor as dignified, mythologizing them as heroic workers and the backbone of the country instead of showing them forced to do humiliating jobs like selling apples on street corners, or rummaging for food in back alley trash cans.

To rhetorically demonstrate the mythology of heroic workers, artists created portraits of people engaged in satisfying work, revealing land abundant with crops and a harmonious communal order void of the xenophobia otherwise rampant in the country during the twenties and thirties.\(^{233}\) Hence, the realities of segregation, sexism, nativism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism, so much a part of the fear-mongering atmosphere throughout the interwar period, drew little commentary. Moreover, images of rural and urban workers were never true to the reality of difficult working conditions or the class and racial struggles which actually prohibited laborers from rising above and out of their conditions.

The artistic movement known as Regionalism grew out of discourses on essential Americanism by contributing to the search for a “true” America.\(^{234}\) It also reflected the New Deal agenda of boosting national pride and confidence in American character and culture. Regionalists sought to divorce art from its European roots and

\(^{231}\) Bustard, 16, O’Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects*, 41-42.
\(^{232}\) Bustard, 16.
create an aesthetic style and subject matter unique to American artists.\textsuperscript{235} Regionalists praised the fecundity of the earth, the joys of planting, and the stability of rural institutions, and they were more celebratory and even nationalistic in content.\textsuperscript{236} The tendency toward American Regionalism was well grounded in American artistic practice by the 1930s, most prominently prior to FDR’s establishment of the WPA, by Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood.\textsuperscript{237}

More than both the Social Realist and Regionalist movements, however, American artists were impressed by the Mexican Muralist movement. With its emphasis on native peasantry and mythic folklore as subject matter and a simplified narrative style easily accessible to the untrained viewer, Mexican muralists created the ideal “proletarian” art. The revival of the Renaissance tradition of painting ideological propaganda on the walls of public institutions and cultural venues exemplified the Mexican muralists’ genius at constructing a cultural unity and character after the Mexican revolution of 1910.\textsuperscript{238} The success of these artists in using murals to represent a proud and colorful history thus became the primary model for American artists working on 1930s relief art programs.

In Europe, ruling classes typically used the tradition of mural painting or hanging paintings in public areas to educate their subordinates by visually presenting those in power and their ideological notions about social order, taste, and moral duty. Artists working for Stalin, Hitler, and the Mexican government understood the power of these public documents to communicate ruling class ideology and used their knowledge of propaganda to construct images of the proletariat, the patriot, and the superior race to suit their respective causes. Each “revolution” created a new aesthetic style unique to its leaders’ perception of an ideal citizen. The Mexican mural movement developed the concept of a “people’s art,” as did the Soviet government, done for public display and propaganda, thus borrowing from their contemporaries in Mexico, the Soviet Union and Germany. American artists, writers, photographers, musicians, and dramatists formed a uniquely American set of ideals about the average citizen, an idealized past, a utopian future, and perhaps more importantly, a conception of the common American.

\textsuperscript{235} von Blum, 51.
\textsuperscript{236} David P. Peeler, \textit{Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 208.
\textsuperscript{237} von Blum, 51, Baigell, \textit{The American Scene}, 18.
\textsuperscript{238} Baigell, \textit{The American Scene}, 43.
Reflections of qualities associated with common citizens were easily found in Roosevelt's national speeches and radio addresses. This portrayal has permeated American identity ever since, indicating how well WPA artists merged revolutionary and propagandistic visual rhetoric of their contemporaries with American power struggles to avoid revolution.\(^{239}\) American artists seeking to change the conception of U.S. capitalism from that of the powerful versus the weak to one highlighting democratic opportunity for all looked to their Mexican, Soviet, and German counterparts for new images and aesthetic rhetoric that could help them represent their own society at its best.

The combination of these aesthetic and psychological elements affected the sensibilities of WPA/FAP projects by encouraging social consciousness and portrayal of a society sustained by the idealism of the New Deal administration.\(^{240}\) The conflation of these influences formed a movement in art known as American Scene painting, which quickly became the norm for New Deal artists. American Scene painting typically included American achievements, localities, and dreams as subjects. WPA artists generally painted in this style because, whatever their subject, it had to be acceptable to the general public. For example, nudes were strongly discouraged, as was anything too complicated or intellectual in theme.\(^{241}\) Subjects were expected to be easy to comprehend so that anyone might enjoy them. In the words of Charles Moore, chairman of the National Commission of Fine Arts in 1933, "Art worthy of a federal building . . . must possess universality, beauty, and must promote American patriotism."\(^{242}\)

**Nationalized Content**

Critics charged New Deal art programs only appealed to the mass population by bringing art to the popular level, which was not the purpose of art.\(^{243}\) But removing art from its status as an elitist intellectual pursuit was exactly what artists working for the government were expected to do. If the style or subject matter of a mural placed in their community offended individuals or groups, they could request a hearing to determine the appropriateness of the work.\(^{244}\) In some cases, murals and easel paintings were

\(^{239}\) Bustard, 18-19.
\(^{240}\) Contreras, 25.
\(^{241}\) McKinzie, 23, 57.
\(^{242}\) as quoted in McKinzie, 7.
\(^{243}\) McKinzie, 110.
\(^{244}\) O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects*, 41-42.
removed by petition, but in most cases the artists made small changes to the design or content, and in some instances the artist merely offered an entirely new subject. For example, Fletcher Martin’s original mural for the Kellogg, Idaho, post office, *Mine Rescue*, depicted the wreckage of a mine shaft collapse. Although the mural was praised by mine workers, local industrialists opposed its content because they found it too critical of working conditions. The original was thus replaced by a painting of a prospector founding the town.\(^{245}\)

Other kinds of complaints centered on the portrayal of characters who bordered on the sordid side of life. Paintings of prostitutes and drunken sailors and even caricatures of tourists suffered rejection from community critics because they did not appropriately represent the way Americans wished to see themselves and the world around them. Therefore, many of the works produced under WPA sponsorship depict men working in occupations most hurt by the depression, such as the construction trades, farming, mining, and manufacturing. Contrary to the reality of idle plants, unemployment, and farm foreclosures that otherwise haunted Americans during the 1930s, bucolic scenes of American industry and ingenuity were much desired subjects for government-sponsored artists.\(^{246}\)

Though there was always a strong emphasis on America’s agricultural history in WPA/FAP public artworks, the Depression era might also be known as “The Decade of Machines,” with the proliferation of automobiles, household appliances, radios, assembly lines, etc. Artists could either depict technology as the promise of a better future or the demise of the present, and WPA artists tended to do the former.\(^{247}\) With the objective of preserving capitalism, Roosevelt’s New Deal administration committed to sustaining and expanding a consumer economy in which the social uses of technology were central. So frequently, if not romanticizing agricultural work, scenes were dominated by travel and machine motifs with their promise of progress and comfort. Agricultural scenes often concentrated on new technologies such as tractors, combines, and rural electrification, or on the industrial machines of motion, such as trains, planes, and automobiles. These most prominent forms of skilled labor were typical trades in the Northeast and Midwest,

\(^{245}\) Bustard, 16.


\(^{247}\) Gormley and Marling, 138.
where the Depression hit hardest. Scenes of industrial workers show the same kind of concentration and skill applied to their work as those of craftsmen, even though they involved much heavier and often collective labor. Iron and steel manufacturing, mining, lumbering, masonry, drilling for oil, and anything having to do with locomotion proved popular subjects. Typical examples include Edmund D. Lewandowski’s *48 States* sketch for the post office in Hamilton, Illinois, and William Gropper’s *Construction of the Dam*, in the Department of Interior, Washington, D.C.248 In each of these murals technology takes center stage, overshadowing both the landscape and the human workers.

Gropper’s mural, one of the best examples of how WPA artists merged images of human strength and technology, shows three groupings of men in the foreground. The curvature of their muscles echoes the curve in the large section of dam being moved across an enormous gorge. The monumental space between the men and the dam serves as a metaphor for the enormity of the task and the imminent result of human ingenuity. It is interesting that the artist made the obviously modern architecture of the dam part of the majestic landscape of mountains in the background, linking the past with

248 Park and Markowitz, 140.
the future in numerous ways. While the mountains could reflect any location, the openness surrounding them suggests the uniquely wide open spaces of the western American landscape. This pairing also suggests the merging of the pioneering spirit of the west with that of the industrial east to become one in the building of this great technological and geographical feat.

As in most WPA/FAP murals, the features of the quintessential American man appear to include those of white males of northern European heritage, except for one figure placed at the center of the middle grouping. His body is turned toward the spectator with his face in profile, identifying him as an African-American. The positioning of his left hand next to that of a white man’s hand can be read as yet another metaphor for the merging of the past with a future where men of all colors can work together to build the nation. Painted in the prominent location of the Department of the Interior, Gropper’s mural is a testament to the American work ethic and worker accomplishments, a theme which characterized much of the WPA/FAP contribution to the construction of a national identity.

Most artists concentrated on images of workers instead of civic leaders or business owners. This was one way the government and middle-class businessmen could appease the working classes – by making them seem heroic partners in success. Portrayed as embodying intelligence, vitality, and vigor, workers appeared happy to be of “service” in their labor. Labor movements in the 1920s and 1930s were growing in numbers and political strength, so these images both acknowledge the workers, while also silencing them through cooptation. Thus, representations of manual laborers and domestic workers functioned as a form of social control since they pacified the workers by encouraging such public recognition of the rhetoric of dignity, power, and admiration for worker contributions.

Source and Denial

In addition to representations of the industrial worker or the pre-industrial life, popular media also helped shape the representative American character in people’s psyches. WPA artists borrowed freely from movies, comic strips, and novels where these forms of cultural discourse made the cowboy, the Indian, the farmer, and the pioneer instantly recognizable as the “common man.”

“average” American in popular media and WPA/FSA artworks were thus dangerously misleading in their failure to accurately portray the reality of diversity in the nation. When artists did depict minorities they often repeated stereotypical characterizations drawn from popular culture. For example, African Americans were typically portrayed as incapable of helping themselves and thus dependent on the welfare of others. Very often, based on the radio characters of Amos and Andy or film characters such as “Stepin’ Fetchit,” blacks were portrayed as dumb buffoons or clowns, happy to make white people laugh at them. Of course, when scenes of the South included African-Americans, they were usually working at stereotypical jobs such as picking cotton or bailing tobacco. And, despite the brutal reality, depictions of Southern relations often showed black and white racial groups living in harmony as neighbors.

The danger in creating mythic characterizations of non-white groups and denying the tumultuous interactions of race and class in American history was that, while fictional, the cumulative effect of repeated stereotypes could eventually become confused with knowledge. This was particularly true if the characterizations were viewed as a form of documentary history, as were Farm Security Administration photographs. For example, one of the primary noticeable characteristics of these murals is the frequent absence of women and non-white Americans. Having no representation, they could not be idealized as the common man or average citizen, so clearly people in these groups were further dis-empowered by the lack of their images. When subjects did include African American or Native American images, they were frequently used to symbolize the uniqueness of America because they were exotic images of the mysterious “new world.” Native Americans might be portrayed as the mythic “Brave” or the subservient “Squaw,” but more often than not, their images were used to illustrate either the wilderness or domestic settlement, i.e. reservation-life.250 African Americans were portrayed far less than Native Americans, Hispanics, or Asians, and women of any race were depicted less often than men. Rarer still were references to white ethnic diversity or of factual histories of riots, lynching, slavery, servitude, prostitution, and immigrant discrimination, all of which were dismissed as inappropriate subject matter. Few elderly people were exalted for their wisdom, courage, or leadership, but rather they

---

appeared as parts of an extended family, dependent and unable to manage for themselves.

Some depiction of racial oppression appears in murals like those painted by Anton Refregier on *The History of San Francisco*, in Coit Tower. WPA officials and community members originally rejected Refregier's work because of the controversial nature of his subjects, such as *Sand Lots Riot*, in which Refregier illustrates a violent battle between white vigilantes and Chinese dock workers. The scene depicts one white vigilante severing the braid of his captive with a knife while another white man, with raised machete, holds the queue of another Chinese captive indicating a similar action is about to occur. The size, coloring and angularity of the white men's hands compared to the size of their Chinese victims is striking. So too is the compositional similarity of this mural to that of a Mannerist painting of *The Deposition* (1536-1603) by Santi di Tito Titi, a cynical reference at best.

![Sand Lots Riots, Anton Refregier](Fig. 30)  
![The Deposition, Santi di Tito Titi](Fig. 31)

Other murals in *The History of San Francisco* series include one on the Donner Party, known for the cannibalism that ensued when their wagon party became stranded by a winter storm in the mountains, and another on the Mission Delores depicting a Franciscan monk preaching to a group of Native American women while Native American men shepherd and harvest food for the Mission. The intensity and Baroque attention to composition in Refregier’s mural series is uncharacteristic of most WPA commissions. These murals show a history based more on class and racial prejudices
than on peaceful, productive, and progressive aspirations. Much more typical were scenes extolling the virtues of the common man, often rather flat in emotional content and not meant to stir the passions of their spectators.

In part, portrayals of minorities were largely ignored because local WPA administrators deliberately censored subject matter to avoid unpleasantness. Native American-settler confrontations or the historic presence of slavery in the South were topics few communities wished to acknowledge. When minority figures were presented, these non-white figures typically exemplified the American “melting pot,” supporting the rhetoric of American democracy as equality for all citizens. Consequently, the standardization of images and stereotypes completed under WPA/FAP aegis became just as manipulative as that found in magazine advertisements, popular movies, and radio broadcasts. The fact that images presented in various media were so similar and so accessible to the masses assured that both ideological beliefs and preferred representations of Americans remained consistent with ruling-class values.

Gender and Race: Invisible But Not Forgotten?

Personalizing the Rhetoric

Despite differences in political ideologies between artists in the U.S. and their international peers, the visual rhetoric embedded in the “style” of U.S. government-supported arts remained consistent with respect to views of gender roles, and tended to rely heavily on a masculinized image of the worker. Representations of the male body were usually thick and solid, emphasizing the qualities of strength, endurance, health, and youth.

(Fig. 32) Monumental Worker (1935) (Fig. 33) The Riveter (1938), Ben Shahn
Encoded in the muscular male body type was an implication of virility in the American man, and by extension, virility in the country. In American murals of the 1930s, male figures often labor in unison to complete some great public project. Images of manual labor became popular because they emphasized human strength over mechanization, and the team effort of working together further implied a unity in the goals of the people, the state, and the profiting class. These figures and scenes also represented the productivity made possible when people unified toward a common goal, and they reminded citizens of the link between past achievements and future prosperity. Such images were meant to counteract the degradation felt by many unemployed workers and replace it with the enduring ideal of virtuous manly labor. And the strength and fortitude of these figures bolstered the public confidence in the country’s ability to recover from the Depression.

Not only were portraits of the worker associated with land and nature, but structural hierarchy and social order can be seen in the visual rhetoric of fashion and body types. For example, women’s clothing showed strength and mobility while men’s clothing emphasized size and strength. The stylization of female bodies mirrored that of male figures, presenting them as complements to men. Geometric patterns and vertical lines made both male and female bodies more architectural, implying stability and longevity. While male figures appeared to be like giant athletes, female figures typically depicted a woman in her prime reproductive years, healthy, and fertile – like the land, and by association, the nation. Female bodies appeared wholesome and curvaceous but seldom sexy. Occasionally, female figures were depicted as muscular, with feminine features deliberately simplified to be attractive, yet plain.

---

251 Bridwell Beckham, 177-178.
Clothing for both men and women was also made to look utilitarian; typically simple working outfits void of too much decoration or any implication of glamour. The visual rhetoric of clothing, then, coincided with FDR’s conceptions about the common man and woman. Clothing was intended to reflect the industrious energy of the time, the quick pace of life and work, and above all, mobility. The uniform aspects of work clothes fit with the loss of individual style and choice -- workers on the assembly line looked as similar as did the widgets they produced. The uniformity of work clothing did, for better or worse, contribute to a feeling of belonging or membership in the proletariat. Standardized work clothing did, however, become a way to separate those in the working classes from those in the more elevated white-collar class professions and thus contributed to growing consumption as a form of social mobility. Young women who worked in offices might bridge the gap between social class by wearing more fashionable attire, demonstrating upward mobility in the work force and subsequently in class status.

Adhering to contemporary fashion signified social conformity and a certain amount of loyalty to American ideals. Being “fashionable” was thought to make one more American and in tune with democratic values through the use of appropriate color and style. Interestingly, communist populations typically seem to have rather drab ways of dressing, at least to Western eyes. Words like “plain,” “dull,” and “unimaginative” come to mind when thinking of the popular image of citizens living in a communist economy. No doubt this uniformity was encouraged in communist countries as a way to
diminish obvious disparities between classes and independent expression. As the
governments of Germany and Russia became more and more focused during the 1930s
on their national image and national character, they authorized a certain fashion sense
that reinforced this image. So too in America, but there fashion trends were pointedly
directed toward all things un-European. However, just as the military-like uniforms of
Soviet and German popular dress catered to ideological state values, dressing like other
Americans demonstrated loyalty to the principles and values of Americanism:
individuality, simplicity, and democracy, yet a "commonality" in social class which implied
simultaneously a condition of classlessness and one shared "common" or central class.

(Fig. 35) One Hundredth Anniversary (c.1938), Arnold Blanch

When we see images of the family in New Deal artworks, male figures embody
paternal fatherhood. Male figures were understood to be the family breadwinner and
head of the family. Additionally, female figures typically appeared as mothers or
daughters, but frequently also held allegorical meanings such as symbols of fertility,
nourishment, or renewal. Therefore, images of rural families often served as allegorical
symbols for the best in national life as well as a link to an idealized past. Many artists
structured murals by positioning male and female figures on opposite sides of the
composition. Like two pillars, they occupied equal visual weight and provided a sense of
stability, reinforcing the message of the dual partnership of family/citizen responsibility.
However, contrasting men and women in such a way only encouraged traditional notions
of gender difference and gender hierarchy.
Art from this period reveals many examples of ways in which the prevailing notions about gender, race, and class were visually composed to reflect the dominant social order. In murals, female figures were often placed on the left side of the composition, perceptually the weakest side because Western viewers read from left to right. The right side of a composition is perceived to have greater visual importance. Female figures placed in the center, would be more likely to have symbolic or metaphorical significance. More subtle elements of the composition also projected the idea that women were the weaker gender. Women were frequently painted in a seated position, appearing less active and more submissive when juxtaposed against standing male figures. Men were usually seen working, in action, while women inactively held a baby or the hand of a child. Women seemed prominent only in depictions of family and community life, where they symbolized motherhood, family, and society.

Another way of organizing compositions to create impressions of stability and orderliness was through gender symmetry. Many muralists employed a pyramidal structure for symmetry in their visual narratives. Symmetry stabilized the composition so that, no matter how loud or active other elements may be, the overall result was still a formal arrangement. This pyramidal structure was most characteristic of Renaissance art, exemplified in numerous paintings from the early 15th to mid-16th centuries (such as the *Virgin and Child* [c.1508] by Raphael and *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* [c. 1510] by da Vinci).
One should remember that American artists of the 1930s were trained in the European academic tradition and many, if not most, would have traveled and studied in Europe. Familiar with Western European tradition in the arts, they would have drawn on that knowledge and training when composing their own artwork. Maternal images in murals
and FSA photographs frequently referred to images of the Madonna and Child, rhetorically referencing the espoused religious values of most Americans. The “Madonna and Child” image in Settling the West by Ward Lockwood best illustrates this tendency. Even if the Madonna motif was a reference to Catholicism, the suggestion of religious content and women as the spiritual guardians of the family and nation was satisfying to many.

Images of female leaders capable of acting on their own seldom appear in WPA/FAP public murals. Consequently, women rarely appear self-sufficient or engaged in productive activities other than domestic service. Occasionally, public art works depicted female laborers in the public realm, but more often women were shown working in the domestic realm or as teachers, nurses, and musicians. Not only did this deny the reality of women who worked in low-paying service or factory jobs, but it presented only one possibility for female contribution to national recovery. Women could do their part, but their part was carefully prescribed.

The fact that women were almost always seen as inactive undermined the image of women as sturdy assistants, working side-by-side with men to create a democratic home and nation. If static, a female figure could more easily be perceived as an allegorical figure. If not allegorical, she was most likely represented as a helpmate to men. Women farmers in particular might have been depicted as partners and co-workers on the land, but more often female figures simply represented goodness and plenty.

Prevailing notions about gender, race, and class were thus “ordered” through visual rhetoric in public murals. It is clear from the localities, clothing, activities, and body types most often found in these visual scenarios that the average American did not easily move to a higher social position or one of power. In fact, we see a very limited range of possibilities in these representations. Comparing images in FSA photographic imagery of this era with those depicted in WPA/FAP public murals or sculptures, one notes that non-Caucasian and lower working-class characters were quite often missing from the dialogue. Rather, everyone has been mythologized or manipulated into white, “middle” class pioneers, farmers, or industrial laborers, existing in happy family units. This is not surprising, since social hierarchy of race and social class in the 1930s maintained that native-born Protestant workers were more respectable than Southern
European immigrants and African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American workers of the same economic status.

**Summary**

As workers' status fluctuated during the Depression era, the petite bourgeoisie became more evident through public murals and sculptures. Meanwhile, artists enjoyed revised status as both intellectual elites and simultaneously contributing members of the proletariat. The perception that one could exist as both in some kind of middle ground clearly contributed to the emergence of a middle-class position which absorbed the values of both blue and white-collar workers. Ultimately, the resultant understanding that the American worker/citizen could experience social mobility in this way raised concerns among those in the white-collar class who worried that their more privileged status and Puritan ideals would be lost and forgotten in the mire of economic depression.

As a public art form, public murals and sculptures in the thirties did much to rebuild self-confidence and construct a self-image of Americans and their history. Artworks produced under government-sponsored relief programs supported FDR’s rhetoric about the average American as a worker happy to serve the country for the benefit of a greater good. Unfortunately, not only did New Deal characterizations of Americans and American history deny tumultuous relationships between genders, races, and classes, but they visually ignored the existence of such issues by depicting Americans as they wished themselves and their history to be: a harmonious “melting pot” of like-minded citizens working for the shared rewards of democracy and capitalism. Artists working for the WPA created artworks that re-constructed and re-defined the American understanding of democracy as a classless ideology and practice, while implicitly maintaining traditional notions about social class distinctions and how one fit into those classes. Therefore, WPA artists contributed to the construction of cultural identity that FDR and New Deal intellectuals defined and structured as an idealized image of the American citizen based on their concept of a democratic nation. To do so, they created images depicting the “average” man or woman as a good worker/citizen. While images of both blue and white-collar laborers typified their work, visual codes supportive of citizenship, social order, and democracy merged into one representative composite figure: a white Protestant person of northern European descent.
Within this particular public medium, the trope of the "forgotten man" came to represent the average white, middle-class, Protestant American worker. It was also the one medium where fiction and reality merged with past and future to form a wholly universalized image of the common American: an idealized citizen as FDR nebulously described him and her
When journalist Walter Lippman wrote these words in 1929, his comments reflected how the consciousness of the modern man had grown so accustomed to "unseen events and strange people and queer doings with which he had to be concerned," that he found it increasingly difficult to believe in some logical order or principle to modern life.\textsuperscript{252} Lippmann's comment articulated the impact mass media had on what F.T. Marinetti called a "wireless imagination," and the profound influence communication media had on personal as well as mass comprehension of both the world and one's place within it.\textsuperscript{253} Never before did so many people have access to information from so many different sources reflecting an influx of ideas and agendas circulating through public discourses. In fact, one challenge facing Franklin Roosevelt in his first term as President was to stabilize the multitude of public discourses concerning the economy, social experience, labor, and various alternative forms of social organization such as democracy, socialism, and communism.

One thread Roosevelt consistently used to re-weave the economic and leadership paradigms of U.S. society centered on a rhetorical representation of the forgotten (common) man. As seen in previous chapters, visual representations of this average American citizen appeared in various forms of media during the 1930s. As the most visible, and possibly the most influential, of cultural institutions during the inter-war years, Hollywood films projected a particular vision of the world which affected contemporary cultural discourses. In this chapter I will review and analyze some of the motion pictures which contributed to the discourse of the forgotten man, the common man, and the "middle classing" of the nation.

In his book \textit{Screening Out the Past}, Lary May described how early cinema became a source and process through which to confront social and cultural concerns:

> The movies were perhaps the most powerful national institution which offered private solutions to public issues. In other words, movies could not change society, but their form could infuse life with a new instinctual dynamism and

\textsuperscript{252} Catherine L. Covert, and John D. Stevens, eds. \textit{Mass Media Between the Wars: Perceptions of Cultural Tension, 1918-1941} (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1984), xiii.

\textsuperscript{253} F.T. Marinetti, as quoted in Covert and Stevens, xii.
provide a major stimulus for generating modern manners, styles and models of psychological fulfillment.\textsuperscript{254}

If May's comments -- and the work of cultural theorists such as Baudrillard, Barthes, and Hall on myth and representational formation -- are accurate, one can understand how motion pictures might exert such potent influence on the construction of the mythic forgotten (common) man character. What made motion pictures so much more compelling than radio, photography, and murals was their multi-dimensional nature. Encompassing elements of motion, sound, vision, and emotion all in one exclusive and enclosed environment allowed audiences to physically and psychologically experience this medium like no other. These familiar elements of reality allowed audiences to easily identify with characters on screen.\textsuperscript{255} By the 1930s, motion pictures had become quite adept at infusing character with layers of signification through the visual rhetoric of dress, gesture, location, occupation, and speech. Audiences were equally adept at reading these significations and comprehending the mythic depiction of fantasy personas.

Public willingness to consume Hollywood narratives and characterizations coincided with an escalation in cultural self-awareness. No one group more willingly consumed visual nuances than the immigrants who made up much of the blue-collar working class. In the early 20th century, the large number of newly arrived immigrants from Europe, China, Japan, and Mexico had provided an enthusiastic audience eager to learn the customs and culture of their new homeland. Motion pictures, in their infancy, had catered primarily to these recent arrivals and blue-collar patrons, but by the 1930s the cinematic audience consisted of members from both the immigrant and native-born blue and white-collar working classes. An inexpensive source of entertainment, movies offered an escape from the economic and social stresses plaguing unemployed or struggling workers. Feeling like the "forgotten ones" of Roosevelt's speeches, members


of these groups could live vicariously through their favorite movie stars who, like themselves, struggled to survive and find justice, romance, and their place in the world.

Movies made the yearnings of the masses tangible and offered examples of how to conform and navigate through society. Through films and the attention given to star celebrities, the public learned possibilities for experimenting with new lifestyle habits of daily life dramatized by the characters, dress, occupations and relationships they saw on screen. As people identified with movie stars, films gathered spectators into a national body, not in the sense of giving them a nationality but in the way they experienced the unity of being a single culture. In particular, films provided a reassuring common identity for urban masses by diminishing the impact of cultural conflicts and presenting a view of a unified culture and their place within it.

As films grew in popularity, however, so too did concerns over subject matter and the communicative power of motion pictures. Many native-born white collar workers worried that motion pictures would corrupt “American” values by teaching “impressionable classes” ways of acting and thinking not in keeping with "their place." Native groups also feared that new immigrants would be easily swayed by radical labor movements and Bolshevism. Some native-born Americans suspected that the popularity of film among immigrants might have something to do with subversive associations, leading to fears that the level of prosperity and social acceptance they had worked so hard to achieve would be negated by immigrant lifestyles and values. Americanization programs were widely publicized in other sectors of the public media, including those of government agencies devoted to assimilating aliens (and Native Americans) to a standardized version of Americanism. Authorities implemented programs such as these to ward off the dangers of radical elements among unassimilated aliens.

The plummeting economy of the 1930s only heightened social tensions between native-born and foreign citizens and rural and urban workers. Products of the immigrant classes themselves, most Hollywood moguls understood the frustrations expressed by

---

256 Roddick, 11-12.
257 Sklar, 122-123, Vasey, 25.
258 Vasey, 204.
the white collar and native-born class of Americans. They addressed those concerns through a concerted emphasis placed on what it meant to be an American, not only in dress and speech, but in ideological ways as well. Hollywood reflected these desires, anxieties, and beliefs in films dealing with gangsters such as Public Enemy (1931) and G-Men (1935), rehabilitation, such as I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932) or Black Legion (1937), and more frivolously in musical fantasies such as those starring Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers.

One way Hollywood exerted its paradigm of Americanism was to standardize the film-going experience according to its perception of a typical audience. In this process, Hollywood’s attention to the white-collar class audience merely expanded to absorb the blue-collar class, rather than abandoning it. The reconstitution of both groups as a larger one-class audience narrowed the ideological spectrum in the direction of WASP values simultaneously obscuring individualized social and ethnic groups. Not surprisingly, Hollywood's perception of the public as one "common" class resembled Roosevelt's rhetoric about national unity and the common man. By universalizing its audience, Hollywood masked class, race, and nationality distinctions behind an inclusive mono-class message, primarily by implementing two elements: Americanization and universalism.260 Paradoxically, as Richard Griffith suggested, concealment of class and ethnic diversities resulted in an ambiguous Americanism, "so 'American' and so 'classic' as to become a geographical abstraction, a nowhere land of dominant ideology."261 But audiences were neither universal nor homogeneous. Blacks, especially in the South, were segregated in theaters and immigrants often remained segregated by their lack of language skills.

Nonetheless, as workers and consumers, those otherwise separated by race or ethnic status could participate in national discourses by identifying with their native-born white co-workers as equals in class and labor struggles. The conflation of blue and white-collar classes through consumption habits and industrialized work allowed both groups to identify themselves as the “forgotten ones.” Values and morals which both groups held sacred became merged into the concept of one “middle” class identity.

White-collar workers valued the Puritan ethic of suffering to reach salvation, an ideal that

---

had been assimilated into the idea of social mobility for the working classes. This Puritan foundation also contributed to the promise of the “melting pot” because it equated the utilization of consumer products not only with citizenship, but with a demonstrable and necessary transformation of the self. To be “reborn” (as an American) meant a profound change in the culture of daily life, a change in habits and understanding demanded by the new agencies of consumption. A metamorphosis of logic took place, moving from that of agriculture and handicraft to the logic of consumption and mass production.262

Films demonstrated these transformed states most frequently in fantasy films dealing with tribulations of the wealthy. Typically a working-class protagonist (usually female) was thrust into the glamorous world of high society through no effort of her own. By some twist of fate, the perceived superior morality of the lower-class person was rewarded with earthly riches and brought into the world of frivolous consumption habits and lifestyles. The protagonist is perceived as deserving of these riches, and high society folk are somehow redeemed of his or her sins because they accept this person into their lives – his or her willingness to “share” makes them good people. Rags-to-riches themes such as these, even when the protagonist is not down on their luck but rather simply of the "working" classes, brought higher and lower classes together as a mono-class of consumers. The rich were forgiven his or her greed because they acted as Christians, sharing his or her good fortune, and the working-class person entered into the realm of consumer habits and desires, making him or her similar to his or her higher-class contemporaries.263 Two examples of such films exist in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) and Preston Sturges' *Easy Living* (1937). These films will be discussed later in the chapter for their association to the myth of "chance" as it related to social mobility.

By and large, blue-collar workers valued community and loyalty to family, but perhaps the one value which most united native-born and immigrant workers from both the white and blue-collar classes was the ability to consume. Consumption became the unifying element in assimilating a "middle" working class. Seen as one unified class by producers and advertisers, the recognition of a standardized audience coincided with

262 Boorstin, *Hidden History*, 250.
Roosevelt's rhetoric about the common man and woman. Films thus helped shape immigrants and those in the blue-collar class into mainstream Americans, despite the fact that many early films illustrated the xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-black views still prevalent in much of American thought. Consider, for example, the following motion pictures titles that appeared during the 1930s: Sons of the Gods (1930) about a Chinese man who discovers he is not Chinese after all, Massacre (1934) about a man coming to grips with his Native American heritage, Bordertown (1935) a somewhat disguised plea to stay-in-your-place directed at Mexican-Americans, and Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939) aimed at the mistrust of Germans. Though meant to appeal to public tolerance of minorities, these films reflected the reality of native mistrust of immigrants and members of ethnic and racial groups.264

Undoubtedly, motion picture productions catered to the thoughts and beliefs held by those whom filmmakers perceived to be the general ticket-buying population—white-collar, native-born Americans. The pervasive impact of motion picture narratives and the ideologies reflected through motion pictures was not lost on producers who advocated films for didactic or entertainment purposes. In fact, those in the industry understood the power they had to influence audiences so well that they pro-actively established two agencies specifically charged with overseeing production and ideology.

Production and Ideology

In 1922, Hollywood established an internal agency, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. (MPPDA), in response to public demands for censorship. Establishing this agency was most likely a preemptive move to maintain producers’ control over the content of films before the government could place restrictions on the industry. Until 1934 the MPPDA controlled narrative content and distribution of industry productions. Subsequently, it was during this period (1922-1934) that moviemakers established many of the “norms” in motion picture iconography and textual content.265

Lax enforcement of MPPDA codes in the 1920s eventually led to the formation of another administrative organization to oversee Hollywood productions. In a second attempt to establish a moral code of ethics and enforce obedience to laws governing movie production, the Production Code Administration (PCA) emerged in 1934.
important moment in film history served as an index of the motion picture community's achievements based on internal industry cohesion, suggesting to those outside the industry that Hollywood maintained tight control of its productions. Ruth Vasey's study of the Production Code Administration in *The World According to Hollywood*, indicates that distribution strategies largely determined production policies, which in turn constructed a particular view of Americans and Americanism in the interwar years.\(^{266}\) Thus, fearful of governmental regulation, censorship, or public protest, any of which might diminish profitability, Hollywood tried hard to ensure that motion pictures steered clear of any political and social contentiousness.

From its beginning, the PCA had a tremendous effect on the construction and realization of Hollywood narratives and representations, as well as in its connections to the Roosevelt White House. Will H. Hays, who became the first PCA president, devised the Hays Code (as it was called), which described and promoted a cinema of entertainment while simultaneously proclaiming its ideological function. Hays identified with the kind of vociferous "conservative" white-collar WASP groups that wanted control of images. Having already been the first director of the Republican National Committee, Hays seemed highly sensitive to allegations that Hollywood films promoted sex, drugs, and the licentiousness that civic and spiritual groups protested. Responding to calls for censorship in cinema, he first attempted to establish a sense of "good taste" in narrative films. Hence, he created a code of dos and don'ts that was strictly observed, one that accommodated white-collar tastes and values. The Hays Code also forced films to be either didactic or strictly entertainment, with very limited amounts of violence, sex, and ethical nuances. While the family was supposedly the audience to whom Hollywood catered, the fictional audience to which Hollywood actually accommodated resembled the idealized American population that the Roosevelt administration had created, particularly in the ways it both sold a universalized image of Americanism and American values.\(^{267}\)

According to film historian Guliana Muscio, Hays and FDR shared some basic beliefs about exporting the image of American democracy abroad, as well as personality traits that made them highly compatible.\(^{268}\) Though Hays was a Republican, he and FDR both had enormous talent for political craftsmanship, ability in mediating opposing


\(^{267}\) Musico, 67-68.

\(^{268}\) Muscio, 56.
interests, and knowledge of public opinion. They also shared a common opposition to censorship and propaganda, despite the fact that each had mastered these practices. A 1941 letter from FDR to Hays, encouraging him to continue in his position, illustrated Roosevelt's respect for Hays' leadership: "You are the kind of Czar that nobody could call 'a Dictator' because you are fair-minded and do not use a whip but still get things done for the general good."  

As a result of the internal code of regulations, movies began to uphold a standardized perception of an America full of individual, regional, and class differences, yet simultaneously engaged in a complex process of cultural, linguistic, and ideological homogenization. Through proven genre formulas, Hollywood films set a tone and atmosphere for a self-contained universe by following reliable themes that remained faithful to social institutions and national ideologies. This approach was particularly evident in movie narratives centered on conflict with the "other." During the interwar years, the "other" was easily defined as any contrary element: good vs. evil, cowboy vs. Indian, American vs. foreign. As one result of Hollywood's prescribed formulaic productions, all non-WASP ethnic groups appeared to become the other, rather than unique entities or individuals. They were all part of an amorphous and fantastic category -- the foreign -- with only costuming to differentiate one place from another. The standard view of foreigners and foreign environments was carefully packaged to fit favored notions about non-prejudice, romance, heroism, and tolerance. Meanwhile, films brought the now familiar image of America as a cornucopia of abundance, tolerance, social mobility, and democratic freedom to regions around the world.

Examples of how motion pictures dealt with the dialectic tensions between individual and universal, tradition and innovation, and liberal versus conservative ideals may be found in the regional-oriented genres of the western and the southern. Residents of the South still identified theirs as a distinctly unique region of the country, and they were particularly sensitive to how the South was portrayed. Throughout the 1930s, Hollywood returned again and again to the "southern" scenario that portrayed an idyllic, pastoral region of large plantations and a gentry sustained by faithful slaves. Although not as successful as the western, the southern continued to be a popular genre during the first

269 as quoted in Muscio, 56.
270 Vasey, 227.
half of the 20th century. Films in the southern genre had decidedly more political undercurrent than did westerns, particularly during the tumultuous 1930s. With reliance on “proven” formulas for success now well established in the industry, the southern film genre remained consistent with the South’s genteel self-image. A series of “Plantation” films, including *So Red the Rose* (1935) and *Jezebel* (1938), portrayed race relations in a traditional perspective, so as not to unsettle Southern audiences.271

Such images, like those of WPA/FAP murals, relied on a mythical ideal of the quintessential American. Furthermore, southern and western films alike reminded citizens (including immigrants) of lessons from the nation’s past by making them appear relevant to contemporary concerns. The resulting fictional mythologies created a vision of heroes and a heroic past, which somehow persuaded spectators that they themselves were not forgotten. After all, were they not just like those heroic men and women of the American frontier?

Due to this deep concern for offending no one, Hollywood’s “Classic” (1930s) period contributed instrumentally to the construction of a national identity which overlooked diversity and complexity in favor of quickly identified characterizations and standardized plot narratives. By then the industry had learned how best to work within and around the ideological tastes of its various markets, both abroad and at home. Ruth Vasey has noted that studios gave a lot of attention during the 1930s to the representation of religion, politics (both domestic and foreign), corporate capitalism, ethnic minorities, and the conduct of lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, but seldom to such less obvious discourses as big business, questions about the political process, the interests of isolated lobby groups, and the governments of other nations. For example, to appease corporate and government peers the film industry made sure to avoid any suggestion of validating revolution and never to depict scenes of industrial unrest or any direct attacks on organized labor, capitalism, and the forces of law and order. The same concerns were expressed by members of the foreign film market whose governments threatened to censor films with subjects suggesting any form of radical or revolutionary behavior.272

---


272 Vasey, 204. Greece, Spain, Sweden, parts of China, Japan, Italy, Iran and Poland all banned anything suggestive of revolution.
Hence, the 1934 Production Code became a powerful influence on what could or could not be seen by the public. "Classic" Hollywood not only became a national and international cinematic source, it contributed to the re-elaboration and articulation of American national identity. The realm of politics was certainly modified by its marriage with media and new forms of communication in the 1930s. Guliana Muscio has claimed that politics "transformed its ‘public’ into ‘spectators’ at the same time cinema transformed its spectators into a public." In *Hollywood’s New Deal*, Muscio argues that “[m]edia production in the 1930s did not just work as a conveyor belt from economy and politics to society, instead, it was one of the factors that changed political participation and socio-cultural perceptions of the economy." Muscio believes there was “a similar ideological function, and an interchange, between politics and communications . . .,” because both the government and the media had a stabilizing effect on society. Like the New Deal, cinema revitalized the idea of Americanism. Although the economic and institutional reforms put forward as part of the New Deal were only partially effective, the way they were articulated and publicized—cinema-like—lent stability to the American sociopolitical system.

The capacity to communicate in a cinema-like fashion, as Muscio has suggested, referred, in part, to the enormous impact advertising had on all new forms of social communication. In a practical sense, communication media controlled the means to inform and influence public opinion because they all used advertising to their advantage. Principles of advertising, including market surveys and psychological profiling, no doubt influenced the way Hollywood has approached movies as products of cultural communication, as well as the way politicians and the government have communicated to the public. As several scholars have suggested, FDR’s most effective initiative of the Depression was psychological rather than applied; a triumph of appearances over reality. The psychology of advertising was not unfamiliar to FDR, as evidenced by the many effective ways he sold himself to the public or his ideas to Congress and others. Roosevelt came to power as the work force became largely industrial and urban. Through their knowledge and practice of consumption, these workers were already primed for the persuasive influence of media and the trusting belief of the mass

---

273 Muscio, 1.
274 Muscio, 2.
275 Muscio, 64.
audience in its truthful and objective/scientific discourse. For the most part, however, Hollywood contributed to FDR’s image and that of the New Deal autonomously, although Roosevelt received considerable publicity through the showing of newsreels where his charismatic popularity and benevolent authority shone brightly.\(^{277}\)

**Franklin D. Roosevelt on Film**

As former editor of Paramount newsreels and FDR assistant Stephen Early proclaimed, newsreels brought “to a modern world a truer picture of itself, and of its people, than any other agency heretofore known to mankind.”\(^{278}\) Roosevelt himself admitted being “a constant and interested observer of them” and said that “their function had become more and more important.”\(^{279}\) Of course, the newsreels provided FDR and his staff a privileged vehicle of information, especially with the expanded expressive and informative power acquired through the addition of sound. Newsreels appeared in theaters around the world, so through them politicians and public figures were able to reach both national and international audiences. Consequently, newsreels became the perfect vehicle for marrying media with politics.

Roosevelt's savvy and presentation in speech-making on radio or the political pulpit transferred well to the medium of film. FDR’s vitality and gestures, and the expressivity on his face, made him an excellent personality to film and portray within a newsreel, though the content of these newsreels seldom dwelt on particularities of his policies or how effective they might be. They merely presented his self-confident and reassuring image, and that worked well for FDR. For these appearances, Roosevelt’s image and clothing were carefully selected to eliminate the risk of type-casting and avoid association with any particular social group or class. His hats varied from sailor berets to silk toppers. He wore bow ties, sweaters, and short-sleeved shirts just as easily as he donned a dark suit.\(^{280}\) In this way, he could portray himself as one with the common man.

In various newsreels, Americans could see Roosevelt as their president, acting presidential and speaking to “them.” Thus, newsreels were another highly effective form of communication for FDR, particularly since so many Americans went to the movies in

---

\(^{277}\) Muscio, 51.
\(^{278}\) Muscio, 77.
\(^{279}\) as quoted in Muscio, 77.
\(^{280}\) Muscio, 80.
the thirties. Newsreels typically ran prior to the main feature and served as a primary source for national news in these pre-television newscast days. Edited so that audiences saw only certain parts and not the entire speech, newsreels provided enough information to convey FDR's political personality. Newsreels were always shot when the President was ready, so they were not like an exclusive catch or scoop. This widespread visual exposure served to heighten Roosevelt's rhetorical persuasiveness by allowing his audience to see him as a person and not just hear him as a disembodied voice on the radio.

Projecting the President onto the screen magnified Roosevelt's apparent physical strength and endurance. His visibility and robust persona on film countered the rumors and innuendoes about his health frequently espoused by political opponents. Roosevelt's adversaries emphasized FDR's deteriorating physical condition in print articles, in hopes that by their making an issue of his physical weakness, the American people would extend this notion of weakness to his character, intellect, leadership, and ability to govern. However, the sight of Roosevelt in newsreels standing straight and tall while vigorously delivering a speech, wheelchair out of sight, overcame public concerns about his health. Furthermore, Roosevelt's personality, coupled with his understanding of rhetorical persuasion, gave him great power to move people emotionally. Through newsreels, FDR could convey his ebullient personality, his charm, wit, and intellect throughout the land. This usually led to high confidence in and loyalty to Roosevelt's leadership.

Indeed, Roosevelt took full advantage of this new era of sound via radio and moving pictures by cultivating his ability to create a new kind of multi-media presidency with these tools at his disposal. He also contributed to the phenomenal change in the nature of cultural communication, because film touched the millions of people unable or unwilling to read English. As it turned out, appearing on film meant that FDR could reach a very broad audience of “average” Americans with his messages.

FDR's savvy at using film and radio as tools of communication must have been enhanced by his own interest in these media for personal entertainment value. Like so

281 Ryan, 27. Approximately 20 million people per week went to see motion pictures.
282 Stephen Early acknowledged that the newsreel made of FDR's first inauguration was a colossal mobilization of journalists, cameramen, and photographers.
283 See Ryan, Neustadt and Windt.
284 By 1919 major news agencies were producing up to two newsreel issues per week. William McKinley was the first president to appear in a newsreel, but it wasn't until Roosevelt took office that newsreels became a tool for political gain.
many other American families, the Roosevelts watched movies and listened to the radio for enjoyment and information. They also had the advantage of social standing which allowed them contact with those who controlled the media, particularly those in the motion picture industry.

**The Roosevelts and Hollywood**

The Roosevelts loved movies, and the family saw a tremendous number of films while in the White House. As soon as the Roosevelts had moved into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, both Warner Bros. Studio and the MPPDA offered to furnish the family with films free of charge.\(^{285}\) In public essays, Mrs. Roosevelt made it apparent that her family was like any other “common man” family in America; they watched films together for family entertainment. Interestingly, the subject of family does not hold a prominent position in film narratives of the 1930s, despite the PCA’s rhetoric which claimed its target audience was the family. Typically, a film showed single men and women finding each other and choosing to live the American Dream.\(^{286}\)

Nonetheless, Mrs. Roosevelt spoke of the need for producers to take responsibility for creating good taste when catering to the demands of the public, particularly in creating family entertainment. Writing for various media, Eleanor legitimized film as the ultimate democratic American art form. In fact, she turned her own movie viewing experiences into a public service by writing magazine articles promoting the educational and entertainment value of films. In one article, written for *Photoplay* in July 1938, she expressed her particular interest in newsreels for their educational value, writing:

> I contend that seeing things is almost a necessity in this visual-minded period of our development, and the newsreels are probably doing as much as the radio, newspapers and magazines to make people world-minded today. . . . Perhaps we are going to find ourselves learning history and becoming better world neighbors someday as a result of new uses to which movies may lend themselves.\(^{287}\)

Eleanor Roosevelt’s position as First Lady added weight to her opinions of films and their value to society. In a second article written for *Photoplay* in January 1939, Eleanor again played up the family aspect of the Roosevelts’ viewing interests and noted

---

\(^{285}\) Muscio, 36.
\(^{286}\) Muscio, 74.
\(^{287}\) as quoted in Muscio, 37.
that many stars “were kind enough to come to Washington” for various events. She was fascinated by the stars and wanted personal contact with them in order “to understand a little better all that goes into giving us entertainment.” She was also known to invite film stars to the White House, and she visited the Hollywood studios of Warner Brothers, MGM, and Twentieth Century Fox.288 Stars who visited the Roosevelts in Washington included Ginger Rogers, Robert Taylor, Marsha Hunt, Jean Harlow, Janet Gaynor, Fredric March and several child actors, Shirley Temple, Tommy Kelly, and Ann Gillis among them.289 Not unlike some recent administrations, an element of glamour attended the White House and the Roosevelts through their connection with various movie stars who visited at their invitation.

Communication between Hollywood and Washington went beyond social engagements and family entertainment. Filmmakers often wrote to the White House asking for FDR’s comments on a particular movie of social significance, but Press Secretary Stephen T. Early would not release film commentary from the Roosevelts until the 1940s, when the war in Europe and the Pacific dictated new approaches to media use and government need. When Early did loosen this policy, he suggested FDR comment only on patriotic messages in films, and not on partisan political positions. Early also had a strict policy that specifically forbade promotional uses of the Roosevelts’ film-viewing habits. He did not allow them to endorse any film or film project. The only time Eleanor encouraged Early to lighten his restriction was after the premier of Gone With The Wind, which Eleanor liked so much she told Early to “[l]et them have publicity.”290

The Roosevelt administration claimed never to use Hollywood cinema “to shape public opinion,” but if we consider the government’s role in documentary and newsreel production, we must recognize the considerable presence of a New Deal filmic discourse. Brains Trust member Raymond Moley wrote in his autobiography The First New Deal, that “[t]he government never wanted or tried to control or censor film production, with the possible exception of the war period.”291 Moley also described the reasoning behind his attention to the film industry and particularly to the Hays Office, stating that he believed self-regulation had to accompany the cooperation among

---

288 Muscio, 40.
289 Muscio, 39. See Muscio for more on the Roosevelts and Hollywood.
290 Muscio, 39.
government, industry, business, and social forces, with the purpose of solving the economic crisis and of "reforming" outdated or aggressive industrial trade practices. Hence, in the first phase of the New Deal, relations with Hollywood were positive toward the Hays Office activities, and the government kept its distance. But after 1937, the administration began denouncing the monopolistic implications of the film industry’s system of self-government and brought suit against several of the major studios as a result.

Warner Bros. was one of the studios targeted for distribution monopoly and anti-trust infringements, despite seemingly close ties to FDR and his administration. Both Jack Warner and his brother Harry were often guests at the White House, but their relationship was less idyllic than one might think. In letters, addressed directly to the President, they sought favors for the film industry, but their letters apparently went unanswered. The government's anti-monopoly civil suit against Warner Brothers studio, accusing it of having restrained exhibition in the St. Louis area, began in the mid-thirties. Surprisingly, Jack and Harry Warner remained intimates of President Roosevelt, but both joined the Republican party nonetheless.292

In addition to the Warners, FDR knew many people in the media industry or people who had contact with Hollywood. Some administration insiders were also connected to business aspects of the film industry, and still others developed close ties with the White House because they offered specific competencies connected to film production. Stephen Early and Marvin Hunter McIntyre had both worked in Paramount Studio’s newsreel division prior to joining the Roosevelt administration. Another Hollywood insider, screenwriter and playwright Robert E. Sherwood, became FDR’s favorite ghostwriter during the war years. Sherwood served as the ghostwriter for some of the most important Roosevelt speeches of the 1940s. In his book, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History, Sherwood gives detailed accounts of how FDR worked with the media, noting that FDR often made editorial changes to speeches at the last moment. Roosevelt had an uncanny intuition about how to use words and gestures for effect. Sherwood contributed his “know-how” in the use of words, images, narrative structures, and identification strategies to the administration. As a result of the Hollywood experience of several key administration figures, cinematic technique

---

292 Neve, 61.
permeated the way that the administration and Roosevelt communicated with the public. Personalization of conflict, simplification of reality, emotional identification with sympathetic characters, and even the promise of a happy ending -- all were ingredients of both classic Hollywood cinema and Roosevelt’s oratory. And so it was not by chance that FDR had a screenwriter among his more direct collaborators.293

The connection between Hollywood and the White House existed on other levels as well. Like FDR, some directors in Hollywood were considered populist in their treatment of social themes and issues.294 Films by directors such as Frank Capra, John Ford, and King Vidor elaborated on the relations between community and the individual. The combination of traditional values with social themes made their films popular across the world. Producers too, like Louis B. Mayer, had already developed a form of hyper-Americanism in his films of the early 1930s. Thus, by the late 1930s Hollywood productions were quite in sync with New Deal conceptions of Americanism and cultural politics. In fact, during Roosevelt’s first Presidential race, Hollywood officials and workers supported his election with fundraising activities and expertise at the use of mass communication tools.295 Even the Warners had contributed to Roosevelt’s political career with financial help and promotional activities during FDR’s 1932 campaign. Theirs was the only industry studio that consistently produced films supporting New Deal messages and promoting the administration’s political interests, including foreign relations. Jack and Harry Warner saw themselves as outsiders. Consequently, they felt courageous in dealing with social issues and contemporary themes such as lynching,

293 Roddick, 66.
294 Various actors, including Orson Welles, did radio spots on behalf of FDR, and many of the industry’s biggest stars performed for Democratic Party fundraisers. The MPPDA owned and controlled most of the major studios at the time of FDR’s first inauguration, so access to free newsreel tapings and free electoral propaganda were obviously huge benefits to Roosevelt’s ambitions. Not long after his second inauguration, the bond between the White House and Hollywood deteriorated due to the Paramount anti-trust and monopoly case. World War II resolved old animosities between the two camps, and the administration delegated great authority to the industry in producing government information and propaganda documentaries for the war effort. Frank Capra was appointed to head the U.S. War Department Documentary Unit after Pearl Harbor. Capra produced and directed a series of orientation and propaganda films to aid the war effort by explaining the causes of the war, the nature of the enemy, and the values and beliefs for which America and its allies stood (Neve 38). One way Capra and others contributed their expertise was to respond to requests from the Office of War Information to downplay racial stereotypes; to “emphasize that the country is a melting pot, a nation of many races” (Kopes 99). The administration was also very supportive of showing Hollywood films at the warfront and throughout the world.
295 Neve, 61.
anti-Semitism, and antagonism toward vagrants and tramps which other studios avoided.\textsuperscript{296}

Thus, films produced by Warner Bros. studio exist as cultural texts which reveal elements of ideological exploration consistent with contemporary public and political discourses. Concerns about the loss of morality, leadership, class and labor struggles, were frequent film narratives produced by Warner Bros. Studio. Films made by Frank Capra in particular wrestle with questions of social concern and the mythic American identity. It is in Capra’s films that the concept of the ideal American citizen is most apparent and most solidified as a member of the WASP middle class.

**The Studio, Capra, and The People**

In his study of Warner Bros. Studio in the thirties, film historian Nick Roddick argues that films produced by this studio early in that decade imply “the breakdown in the ‘normal mechanisms of American society,’ while those of the second half of the decade show these mechanisms to be largely restored, and deal with organizations which provide only a passing threat to society.”\textsuperscript{297} Warner Bros. Studio gained a reputation for making social films about miracle-working powers attributed to federal authorities. For example, gangsters became a popular topic in 1930s, transferring the cowboy hero of the frontier to the urban male experience. Gulliana Muscio has noted that both characterizations portrayed the dilemma for the American male – independence and isolation, or attachment and responsibility.\textsuperscript{298} Either dilemma reflected male anxiety regarding responsibilities to family, community, and the nation at large. Films about gangsters and other social problems produced by Warner Bros. revealed a more optimistic view that the New Deal could defeat manifest injustices in American life. Perhaps this was due to enforcement of the PCA mandate that movies depicting an “amoral world view” and antisocial protagonists would no longer be permitted.\textsuperscript{299} Warner Brothers historian Richard Griffith argues that it was the Warners who “led the way in accustoming audiences to the notion that the screen could

\textsuperscript{296} Neve, 20, 26.  
\textsuperscript{297} Roddick,155-156, Neve, 15.  
\textsuperscript{298} Muscio, 75.  
\textsuperscript{299} Neve, 15.
legitimately take its place beside the printing press as a channel for the discussion of public ideas.”

Civic-historical acculturation dedicated to heroes in American myth and history also achieved popularity in 1930s cinema. Confessions of a Nazi Spy (1939) and Juarez (1939) both exemplify the diverse ways Hollywood dealt with this topic. The city boy, an image familiar from daily life, was characterized by actors like James Cagney, who usually played the ordinary man and American hero. Others, like Jimmy Stewart and Will Rogers, often portrayed his rural counterparts.

The films of Frank Capra, who worked for Warner Bros. Studio throughout much of the 1930s, are probably best known for portrayals of "common men" thought to characterize the quintessential American hero similar to that of Roosevelt's common man. In fact, his work tended toward a particularly divisive kind of populism which to some extent actually undermined the populist rhetoric of FDR's administration. Nevertheless, Capra's representations of the common man did much to solidify a visual image of Roosevelt's key theme by placing him in a "middle class" social context.

When Roosevelt evoked the concept of the forgotten men and women as those most vulnerable to the injustices of power and greed, he symbolically made them worthy of opportunities manifest by a democratic society. In Roosevelt's rhetorical vision of democracy, all citizens could benefit equally from capitalism regardless of race, class, or gender. The only way to make capitalism and democracy appear to work for the ill-housed, ill-fed, and ill-clothed of the nation, however, was to absorb them within the standardized image of a common man – the quintessential American citizen. Capra's common man very much represented FDR's WASP ideal, particularly in terms of depicting the new "middle class" version of him.

During the 1930s, Capra dedicated a series of films to the common man/hero-citizen, often played by Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper. Capra's heroes were men "of the people and for the people," in a symbolic if not conventionally representative sense. They really represented a democratic ideal of America invoked throughout the 19th century by those outside “normal politics” who wished to call forth the collective authority of “the people” to attack misguided power and unsound policies, but rarely the status of

---

300 Richard Griffith, 457, Neve, 15. For further discussion of the politics of Warner Brothers' social consciousness films, see Andrew Bergman, We're In the Money—Depression America and Its Films (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 92-109.
powerful elites. Capra's cinematic protagonists, such as Longfellow Deeds, Jefferson Smith, George Bailey, and John Doe, were all would-be forgotten men facing some noble challenge to their morality or to the myth of “Americanism.”

In *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, for example, Longfellow Deeds is a simple small-town man with no apparent outstanding qualities, until he inherits a great deal of money. Capra presents his audience with the portrait of a “common man” (signifying one easily forgotten by more powerful "significant" men) suddenly transformed into a man of power and wealth. When confronted by another “forgotten man,” the newly-rich Deeds uses his power to bring the forgotten man back “into the fold,” transforming him into a common man, like Deeds himself, no longer someone in the "forgotten" class.

*Movie: Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*

*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* typified narrative plots perpetuated by Capra whereby the wealthy became charitable and humanitarian beings. The messages within these films suggested that if the wealthy became aware of others' sufferings, they would naturally act in charitable ways. At their core then, is the intimation that only lack of awareness prevented the ruling class from acting responsibly toward those less fortunate. If made aware, their heart-of-gold nature and common humanity would reveal itself.

Capra’s films often reflected the rhetoric and terminology of populist themes. As the “ideology of the people,” populism, a recurring theme in American history, emphasized that elites had usurped the power of the people. Populists criticized urban interests, bankers, big business men, machine politicians and intellectuals, though recent scholarship on the populist movement stresses its democratic basis and concern for “structural reform of the economic system.” Capra’s films never went that far. Rather, Capra’s heroes fought for a nostalgic resurgence of humanitarianism that called for renewed dedication to integrity, responsibility, grit, principled behavior, and charity, not the reform of values or ideologies. In addition to *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, Capra's films *Meet John Doe, It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* further emphasize the populist rhetoric of a common man working for a greater good, one most consistent with WASP ideals. These quintessential "populist" films demonstrated profound sympathy for the masses and advocated self-help, good neighborliness and

301 Neve, 29.
moral regeneration rather than structural change within society as Roosevelt's "new deal" implied.

The best example of Capra's cinematic populism may be in the film *Meet John Doe* (1941) when Cary Cooper (Doe) recites a speech over the radio. The language, sentiment, and delivery of the speech are quintessentially populist as the voice of the "little man" and obviously referential to Roosevelt's rhetorical use of populist themes and language. The use of vernacular language and metaphors of team players, friends and neighbors, bear a striking resemblance to those used by FDR in many fireside chats. Doe begins his speech by describing himself as the average man like those he addresses. He assures his audience that the attention he's gotten from "big-shots" like the mayor and the governor (FDR would have called them royalists), is nice but he (Doe) is not going to condescend to them; he is one of them, an average guy, a John Doe. The following film clip illustrates the resemblance to Roosevelt's language of unity and supplemented by metaphors of freedom, neighborliness, "the people," and sports.

Movie: Meet John Doe

The speech ends with Doe telling his audience "wake up John Doe, you're the hope of the world." Given that the speech is made on Christmas Eve and began with references to the tenets of Western civilization such as the Roman emperors, Christ and George Washington, the spirit of Christmas (giving, kindness, etc.) and Christian ideology promotes concepts of salvation and rewards for those who suffer. Though the essence of the forgotten man, and the economic circumstances of the Depression, were no longer as powerful as the concern about war in Europe, the "common" man as Roosevelt, and now Capra, defined him looked very much like the image of Gary Cooper as John Doe; a white "average-class" Protestant. The transformation we witness of Cooper (Doe), an unemployed physically-ailing baseball player down-on-his-luck, is exactly the transformation of the forgotten man into the common man.

By 1941, FDR's rhetorical language had found its match in visual form in the character of John Doe and other Capra characters. Through these filmic representations Roosevelt's populist rhetoric and New Deal policy reforms appeared tangible. Richard Griffith has noted that Capra's films always reveal links to such populist values as self-help, equality of opportunity for each individual, good neighborliness, and leadership by decent men opposed to large-scale government,
business, and intellectuals.\footnote{Griffith, 449-450.} Thus, Capra's guiding ideology was clearly populist in the traditional sense but not completely like that of Roosevelt's "reformist" perspective whereby these values were institutionalized through government and business.

At times populism looked oddly like a strong "nativist" sentiment that responded to emphatic symbols of the white Protestant vision of Americanism. Capra's populism was of this ilk, not the populism of Roosevelt's New Deal which sought a more inclusive version of "the people," although Capra's cinematic language was similar enough to FDR's language and rhetoric of populism that they were often conflated in the public mind. As noted in Chapter One, Roosevelt and his administration used populist rhetoric to not only emphasize the dual notion of "the people" as both a unified civic group and nation, but also to present themselves as legitimate representatives of that popular unity when it came to challenging the elite powers over legislation.\footnote{T. H. Watkins. \textit{The Great Depression: America in the 1930s} (Boston: BackBay Books, 1993), 307. Roosevelt was angry with the Supreme Court for invalidating Title I of the NIRA and declaring the Bituminous Coal Conservation Act unconstitutional (1935 and 1936 respectively). The court had also struck down major portions of the AAA and claimed the New York State minimum-wage law invalid. FDR's response was to ask Congress for permission to appoint one additional judge to the federal judiciary for every judge who reached the age of seventy but declined the opportunity to retire. Six of the 9 justices on the Court at that time were over seventy years old, so if the legislation passed, FDR would have had the opportunity to appoint 6 more justices of his choosing, "packing" the court with a liberal majority.} 

Populism in the late 19th century represented a period of moral ideology concerned with the role of government in America. Populists believed in the possibility that elite corruption and expropriation could be reasonably rectified without any fundamental change in the system.\footnote{Neve, 29.} Thus, turn-of-the-century Populism was as much about redistributing power and resources more fairly within a capitalist framework as about anything else. The Louisiana politician Huey Long most represented this ideology in the 1930s, though he too lacked a definitive analysis of how redistribution might work or might change the structural order of power. In fact, the ideology professed by both Long and Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s alarmingly resembled authoritarianism.

Populism of the thirties also included a notion or myth that some "golden age" of the past had been lost. This myth valorized life on the land and suggested those who lived closest to it retained purity and simplicity, and included an impersonal distrust of wealth and power. Faith in "common sense," biblical morality, and leaders who could
represent or personify these values completed the myth, as did the mixture of individualist Christianity and archetypes of self-reliant and self-determined men who set their own course and tamed nature. These characterizations most frequently appeared in Warner Bros. productions. Westerns, especially those directed by John Ford, also conveyed populist ideology, like the “little man versus the world” films made by Frank Capra. Unfortunately, conclusions offered by these films rarely suggested a need to change the social order or status quo of American society, but they did inspire viewers by exalting such populist American values as self-determination and independent achievement.

Whether Capra directly intended for his films to deliver a populist message or to reflect an apostolic view of democratic capitalism remains for viewers to determine. The enormous popularity of his work with audiences suggests that Capra’s films appealed to the ideals and interests of those most immediately concerned with the state of capitalism and democracy — those in the blue and white-collar classes, the very people to whom Roosevelt addressed his rhetoric. The fact that so many of Capra’s films dealt with government, politics, and the naïve innocence of youthful men leads one to understand that his vision was far more deliberate than some have argued. Whether he meant to make mythic films or simply to reflect personal observations of the 1930s, Capra’s films truly gave tangible form to the quintessential common man, especially as Roosevelt conceived of him.

One way that Capra persuaded his audience that these heroes were indeed like everyone who felt forgotten was to compare the images of men like Deeds, Smith, Bailey and Doe with those of the stereotypical forgotten men. In Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, hundreds of men line up in the recently-inherited palatial home of Longfellow Deeds to receive a check, or voucher, for land, one horse, and one cow, which represent Deeds’ vision of opportunity for these men to begin anew. The gaunt faces of these “forgotten men” resemble men shown in FSA photographs.

These silent portraits also feature prominently in Meet John Doe, with face after face centered on the screen like a series of FSA tenant farmer photographs hung on display (see movie clip at the beginning of this chapter). Only in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, however, does Capra show faces that illustrate ethnic and gender diversity.

---

305 Neve, 33.
When Jefferson Smith visits the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. for the first time, he is drawn to a young boy reading words from the Gettysburg Address aloud. Shots of the young boy, his grandfather, an elderly African-American man, and Lincoln’s statuesque head appear in close-up before the camera again focuses on Jefferson Smith. Two young females stand behind Smith, but their presence remains out of focus.

Movie: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

While the plethora of faces depicted in movies like this clearly signified the forgotten man and woman, Capra wanted the audience to see lead characters like Deeds, Smith, Bailey and Doe, representations of the common man, as charitable, responsible, and heroic.

Not only did Capra's films provide a place where the common man's voice could be heard, but they also co-opted his class, ethnicity, and position as a "forgotten" outsider. Comparing representative images of "forgotten ones" in Farm Security Administration photographs to the characterizations of the "little man," the "common man," and the “forgotten ones" in 1930s films it becomes quite evident that the differences greatly outweigh the similarities. Consider the sensible speech patterns, dress, labor, integrity, and self-initiative of Capra’s typical male lead in contrast to the more stark portraits of miners, sharecroppers, and migrant workers constructed to represent the “forgotten” class by FSA photographers. Capra typically transformed the “little man” who first appeared in working-class clothing into a more “appropriate” representative of the people by having him change into a suit. John Doe, Longfellow Deeds, and Jefferson Smith, each representing the prototypical small-town American boy, as a baseball player, a farmer, and a Boy Ranger respectively, were changed visually and psychologically by the authorities who “discovered” them. And, in each of these films, the tensions experienced mirrored the struggles of all "forgotten men" facing the difficulties of adjusting to the new world of machines and urbanization, or trying to balance loyalty to the old country and traditional values with adherence to increasingly universalized and standardized expectations in their new homeland.

Always of white Anglo-Saxon heritage, the heroes in Capra films were indeed characterizations of men and women from idealized small-town America who, at their best, represented the integrity, work ethic, strength of character, and honest innocence of American individuality. In contrast to the rugged and worn appearance of stereotypical "forgotten men," Deeds and Doe, both played by Gary Cooper, and Smith,
played by Jimmy Stewart, were exceedingly tall, lean men who showed little evidence of having worked outdoors or in heavy manual labor. Their hands were not callused, their faces not raw from wind and sun damage, nor were their bodies muscular like men who exerted physical energy to make a living. Furthermore, their solutions to problems certainly seemed populist in spirit, especially regarding the critique of wealth and power. In each of these three films, the hero chastised his fellow men for their greed, dishonesty, and inhumanity, and absence of compassion for their fellow human beings.

Like people around the rest of the country, Capra’s films dealt with the stress and fear of urbanization, including the growing feelings of alienation. With cities growing quickly and the influx of immigrants at the turn of the century having culminated in a population well over 60% immigrant in many urban environments, the simultaneous clash of cultures, languages, work and lifestyle changes created a struggle for everyone, one only made worse by the economic devastation of the Depression. Rural residents, who often felt left behind by the forces of modernization, experienced equally strong pangs of frustration and alienation. Capra articulated these sentiments through a form of visual rhetoric whereby he repeatedly filmed characters from behind their backs. The figures became like silhouettes, simply shadow figures of an anonymous man or woman. From the audience’s perspective, these silhouettes resembled all the other figures seated ahead of them in the darkened theater: shadows of faceless and nameless persons.

In *The Film Since Then*, Richard Griffith writes that, “the blend of realistic problem and imaginary solutions” found in Capra’s films "epitomized the dilemma of the middle-class mind in the New Deal period." Griffith links Capra’s cycle of films with the work of popular writers associated with the *Saturday Evening Post* as well as with members of the middle class whose “sense of property had not been destroyed by the Depression, and who expressed inchoate opposition to the experiments of the administration.” Capra’s films also relate to the earlier Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements, with their defense of individualism against the forces of corporate organization. Quite possibly common knowledge of the mythic narrative of David and Goliath, the classic underdog story so fundamental to Capra’s work, helped the public see each of his protagonists as the archetypal “forgotten man.” Capra’s characterization

---

306 Griffith, 449-450.
307 Neve, 38.
of this symbolic figure as a white-collar, “middle” class worker, and not someone down-on-their-luck, was a powerful visual example of FDR’s quintessential “average” American.

Whereas Capra produced populist and socially-atuned cinematic narratives that echoed New Deal rhetoric and ideology, other directors borrowed more directly from FDR’s discourse regarding the forgotten man. Contrary to the RA/FSA portrayal of “forgotten ones” as economically impoverished and hopeless, Busby Berkeley’s film *Gold Diggers of 1933* characterized the forgotten man as a World War I veteran. In an elaborate final song and dance number called the “Forgotten Man Melody,” a woman walked the street singing about her forgotten man. While she sang, images of haggard old women, exhausted mothers, men in soup lines, and a parade of soldiers carrying stretchers with wounded men all passed behind her. The refrain of the song sent an important message to the viewer: “Remember my forgotten man. A woman’s got to have a man. Forgetting him, you see, means you’ve forgotten me.” By including women in this way, Berkeley managed to manipulate the forgotten man trope in an interesting and innovative manner.

**Movie: Gold Diggers of 1933**

**Freedom, Democracy, Chance**

As a prominent form of popular communication in the 1930s, motion pictures became a good example of how the dominant class maintains control of both the content and the distribution of ideological products such as Americanism. Many forms of mainstream communications also supported ruling class ideals and highlighted the concept of an “essential” American. Whether native-born or assimilated, the definition of a “true” American became identified with support for capitalism, democracy, and WASP ideals.

As an underlying principle, freedom "sold" democracy to the citizenry. In the nascent consumer culture of the early 20th century, the perception of unlimited freedom merged with evolving concepts of choice and social mobility. As cultural theorist Raymond Williams has noted, “A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure . . . . It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified . . . [and] also continually resisted, limited, altered, [and]
challenged by pressures not at all its own.”

Films made during the 1930s and 1940s consistently suggested that a lifestyle guided by the myth of the American Dream – promising upward mobility through hard work and Christian values -- would lead to the rewards of prosperity and social status, thus allowing the practitioner the possibility of membership in the ruling class. Cultural media of this period provided numerous examples of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant rules propagated among the masses. Cultural critic and historian Lawrence W. Levine argues that “popular culture throughout the Depression decade remained a central vehicle for the dissemination and perpetuation of those traditional values that emphasized personal responsibility for one’s position in the world.”

But for Hollywood, this crucial concept of American freedom blended in an odd and confusing way with the serendipity of chance. Nevertheless, through these films WASP ideology and assumptions about status became self-perpetuating.

Numerous films encouraged optimism for the possibilities offered through democracy and freedom during the interwar years. Multiple variations – such as rags-to-riches stories, love stories where the poor girl is found by a rich prince and whisked away into happiness and prosperity, good-versus-evil confrontations, rehabilitation of criminals or “fallen” women, and the strength of individual fortitude in the face of adversity -- achieved their greatest popularity during this classic period of Hollywood film. The filmmaker’s arbitrary selection of an heroic individual set one free from economic struggles and thrust that person into a fantasy land of glamour, consumption, and advanced social standing. A typical scenario depicted one’s freedom to move from one social position to another. Freedom to be discovered also illustrated the importance of chance, for such discovery meant that you were not forgotten. Prior to the 1930s, standard movie formulas had centered on sex, romance, marriage, and money. Pre-thirties films often demonstrated how one could be transformed into another class or another identity through consumer purchases, disguises, or attention from a wealthy bachelor because of one’s extraordinary beauty (aided by the items of consumption and a make-over in manners and speech). Well established by the 1930s, these narratives included not only the subtext of Americanism, but the rhetoric of unity and rebirth;

---

309 Levine, 208.
something movie-goers of the 1930s probably longed for as an escape from the Depression.

For those fantasizing about escape from daily woes, movies offered numerous possibilities for reinforcing the faith that anyone, even the plain and docile, might be recognized or discovered in a crowd. Various media also symbolically alluded to the blessings of freedom through articles describing the arbitrary selection of average individuals winning a prize or being discovered for something previously overlooked. Magazine articles further encouraged such fantasies by detailing accounts of the modestly magnificent pleasure trips arranged for the lucky person, preferably a stenographer or someone similar from the white-collar class.

Unfortunately, this emphasis on chance opportunities actually enhanced the feeling of powerlessness for many who still felt left out or forgotten by their government. With so little work available during the Depression, unemployed workers frequently felt helpless to do anything about their situation. And yet, the hope that luck would find them was clearly on many minds. Movies only encouraged this feeling with the many narratives about discovery. Films featuring Busby Berkeley’s choreography or direction typically based their premise on the luck of being in the right place at the right time. For example, Ruby Keeler, a consistent lead in Berkeley films, often played a young dancer “recognized” for her talents by someone with access to power – a fellow dancer with access to the boss, an observant secretary, or the male lead. Keeler’s personas in *Footlight Parade* (1933), *42nd Street* (1933), and *Dames* (1934) all developed as a result of their discovery. Not as obvious in these narratives, but just as importantly, her characters all received rewards for hard work, beauty and appropriate good girl characteristics such as naivété and sweetness.

Portrayals of personal responsibility could take many forms, however, specifically in the rags-to-riches narratives, but also in the way characters might prepare for chance opportunities or assert individuality to stop evil for the good of others. Nowhere would the myth of the American Dream appear more pronounced than in rags-to-riches fantasy films. Throughout the 20th century, numerous rags-to-riches stories have perpetuated the myth of a mutable class hierarchy as part of America’s democratic ideology. Recent examples of this myth can be found in biographical essays about former President Bill Clinton. Clinton’s storied rise from his childhood in a “broken home” with humble economic status, in an impoverished area of the country, to his Rhodes Scholarship and
eventually the highest position in the land (some would say in the world), has reinforced the myth that any American can move freely from one class position to another. Of course, though this myth of social mutability assumes perennial upward movement, the possibility of a downward plunge has always been an implied threat to those deemed “undeserving” of social status rewards. This moral code contains the implication that anyone of dubious moral character, lacking in patriotic loyalty, or of the “wrong stock” would not merit the benefits of capitalist democracy.

Rags-to-riches stories have long been mythologized in American history, but the mythology never had more practical value than in the 1930s. Fantasies of economic fortune grew so common during the Depression that they were popularized in board games such as Monopoly, with a concurrent rise in gambling and games of chance, and in various forms of popular entertainment, including comic strips, songs, novels, and movies. In fact, the idea of upward mobility was at a premium during the 1930s because it supplied a form of hope, offering security and “control” -- or at least the perception of control -- over one’s life. Upward mobility was, and remains, an elemental part of the American Dream. Emphasis on capitalist values in games like Monopoly and comic strips like Little Orphan Annie epitomized the American Dream as the desire of the “common man” to potentially become an extraordinary man, one with power and influence. But in desiring the American Dream’s upward mobility, one must acquire a certain disdain for the working class and their lifestyle, or at least perceive it to be a lesser state of potential, and accept the stigma imposed on working-class members identifying them as losers in the game of life, unable to make it on their own to a “higher” social position.

The belief that all men are created equal in the eyes of God and in American democracy merged well with the game of chance and the common man scenario. Numerous films encouraged this via narratives about the average “man-on-the-street” or “girl-in-the-café” who was discovered by a movie mogul only to become an overnight success. Again, these narratives increasingly emphasized the relative powerlessness of the discovered persons to rise in status based on their own merits because their plotlines indicated that one need only be available for discovery and not necessarily prepared by professional training or skill. If good things came to those who were lucky, what did it matter to be prepared? Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer noted this trend in films and commented that “[i]ncreasingly emphasis is laid not on the path per
aspera ad astra (which presupposes hardship and effort), but on winning a prize.\textsuperscript{310}

This co-exists nicely with democracy where everyone is equal and each can presumably win any prize just as well as his neighbor can. Unfortunately, it also meant, as Adorno and Horkheimer declared, that, “[n]ow any person signifies only those attributes by which he can replace everybody else: he is interchangeable, a copy. As an individual he is completely expendable and utterly insignificant, and this is just what he finds out when time deprives him of this similarity.”\textsuperscript{311}

The feeling that anyone could benefit from a chance discovery, or luck, also implied a lack of trust in traditional methods of preparation for employment. Adorno accused the 1930s film industry of “stopping at nothing to ensure that all the characters are essentially alike, with the exception of the villain, and by excluding non-conforming faces. They are assured that they are all right as they are, that they could do just as well and that nothing beyond their powers will be asked of them.”\textsuperscript{312} Thus, the notion developed that chance and planning were actually one and the same because, given human equality, individual success and failure supposedly lose any economic meaning.

No doubt the stock market crash of 1929 had much to do with the lack of trust in traditional institutions and traditional philosophies of work. It became Roosevelt’s task to reestablish that trust and to instill trust in the work ethic. FDR made sure to build trust from his constituents by sincerely implying that he would take care of the forgotten man if only he or she would surrender his or her trust to Roosevelt’s leadership.

Movies furthered the concept of trust as a form of surrender to chance. One classic example is the Preston Sturges film \textit{Sullivan’s Travels} (1941). In this movie, Veronica Lake’s character of “the girl” demonstrates several ways a “down and out” person could receive benevolent deeds when she most needs them. When Sullivan (played by Joel McCrea) attempts to learn something of poverty and hardship first-hand for a movie he wants to direct, he is himself rescued in numerous ways. Lake’s character offers to purchase breakfast for him, because she takes pity on his apparent condition as a “bum” down on his luck. Leaving Hollywood as a failed actress, her dream of fame and prosperity having come to an end, she plans to return to her home in the Midwest. Unknowingly, Lake has chanced upon her ticket to success since Sullivan

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{310} Adorno and Horkheimer, 146.
\item \textsuperscript{311} Adorno and Horkheimer, 145-46.
\item \textsuperscript{312} Adorno and Horkheimer, 146.
\end{itemize}
is a famous director with the ability to make her dream come true. Her good deed does not go un-rewarded, as he offers to write a letter of recommendation for her to the director she is sure will notice her talent. Of course, the reward in the end is not a career of her own but marriage to the successful director.

In another example of success by chance, we find Jean Arthur in Sturges's *Easy Living* (1937) as the recipient of “fortune” from a completely chance occurrence. While riding in an open-air bus, a full-length sable coat falls on officer-worker Mary Smith (Arthur). She tries to find the owner and return the coat, but when she does, J.B. Ball, a wealthy financier, simply gives the coat to her with no real explanation. By wearing the coat, Smith is “treated” to a series of fortunate events because she is mistaken for someone of another class. Eventually her path leads to Ball's son, with whom she falls in love and subsequently marries, allowing her to claim a legitimate position in the upper class. Thus, she secures her future through her good fortune at having been the beneficiary of such a chance occurrence.

In *My Man Godfrey*, the basic theme of someone from a lower income class securing prosperity and social recognition remains intact, but with a peculiar twist. William Powell plays Godfrey Smith/Park, a “forgotten man” found living in the city dump. The opening scene of the movie finds a beautiful and wealthy woman offering five dollars for any “forgotten man” willing to assist her in a scavenger hunt. Structured as a screwball comedy, the film also offers biting commentary on the disparity between rich and poor.

As in many films of the Depression era, *My Man Godfrey* portrays the wealthy as extravagant not only in material excessiveness but also in their ignorance toward the daily struggles of those less fortunate. In one of the more blatant Hollywood depictions of the forgotten man trope, the moral of this story actually accomplishes two things: first, while satirizing the haughty intellect and vulgar irresponsibility of the wealthy, it suggests that members of the ruling class actually have a “heart of gold” when they become aware of the needs of others; and secondly, it suggests that the ruling class has been forgotten in the tumult of the times. Godfrey is later “discovered” to actually come from a powerful and influential Boston family, the Parks, having chosen to relinquish his ruling-class status and comfort in response to a failed love affair, thus punishing himself for personal failure by “hiding” among the “forgotten ones.”
Directed by Gregory La Cava for Universal, this film resonated strongly with Depression-era audiences, who appreciated its attention to morality and class. The film was ultimately politically provocative in its messages about the need for jobs, humanity, humility, and the redistribution of wealth, if not outright charity. Represented much like the tenant farmers of FSA photographs, the "forgotten men" living in the film's city dump are found to be multi-skilled, and they continue to hold fast to the American work ethic as well as their dignity. La Cava portrayed these men as people down-on-their-luck and therefore not responsible for their difficult situation, making them deserving of help and sympathy from the ruling class. The storyline also implies that these men could be returned to their "good citizenship" status if given the opportunity. The movie also favorably represented the rich, at least once they become aware of how they may help the deserving unemployed. In the end, Godfrey returns to his (rightful) place among the ruling-class after orchestrating an urban renewal project with the expertise of his former companions among the working-class "forgotten men." The labor of these forgotten men and the money of the rich combine to transform the city dump into a nightclub/mall. The rich are clearly shown to be saviors of the poor because it is only due to their motivation to put things in order and create a marketable entity, from which they will receive profits, that the "forgotten ones" are restored to their former ordinary selves as laborers and contributing members of society.

A similar message of "goodness can be found in the wealthy" can be found in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), starring Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. This time the protagonist, a wealthy heiress who literally escapes her life of privilege by diving off her father's yacht, evades the detectives sent to bring her back by riding a bus, such a common form of transportation that no one can imagine she would use it. The person benefiting from a chance encounter, in this case, is a rogue journalist, Peter Warren, played by Gable. Issues of social class clearly infuse this narrative, and as La Cava does in *My Man Godfrey*, Capra uses popular iconography regarding the wealthy to establish class contrasts. Locations provide an obvious method of contrast in this film, with commoner Warren (Gable) and heiress Ellie Andrews (Colbert) seen primarily in a bus or bus station while Ellie's wealthy father appears on his yacht, in his office, and home. These divergent locations punctuate the concept that Ellie is "slumming" in order to hide from her up-scale social class.
As in many of Capra’s films, the wealthy literally burst at the seams from abundance. The camera shows their clothes tightly stretched across their ample bellies; meanwhile the silky, fine fabric of the ladies’ gowns hug the curves of their ultra-thin bodies. In either case, the extremity of their forms only highlights the ostentation of their glamorous lifestyles compared to the simple and standard working outfits worn by men and women of the "lesser" classes. Wealthy characters in this picture are also typically surrounded by things: pictures on the wall, bookshelves filled to capacity, and even large numbers of people. Contrarily, common people often appear standing in front of a door or wall with little ornamentation around them. Not surprisingly, the interaction between Warren, the renegade, and Ellie, the society princess, results in romance. Despite their class differences and perceived disdain for each other’s class origins, the two discover that love will apparently heal all issues. The father too is seen to be a level-headed man who encourages the love between them because he sees in Warren the integrity and values of an honest and righteous man.

The underlying message to the average blue and white-collar viewer is, again, that the rich are actually the same as you and me and should be appreciated, not forgotten, for their abilities to help make things right. It is unlikely that La Cava or Capra consciously intended for their films to empower the ruling-class in this way, but such subtexts bring attention to the difficult path Hollywood filmmakers had to walk in catering to the mass audience of the 1930s while not offending rich studio moguls or wealthy financial patrons. Hollywood producers and directors also needed to remain as apolitical and non-offensive to members of the New Deal administration as possible.

**Summary**

As a source of information and entertainment, motion pictures had an enormous influence on cultural identity formation during the interwar period. Through a highly organized system of production and distribution, the motion picture industry reached all regions of the country, all classes, races, ages, and genders. Perceiving its audience as a single entity of like minded spectators, much like advertising agencies advocated, Hollywood studios fashioned the image of the common viewer much like that of Roosevelt's rhetorical common man. In attempts to encourage Americanism, Roosevelt's rhetoric, New Deal strategy, and Hollywood studios catered to WASP ideals and the mythic American Dream in constructing their representative characterizations of the common man.
Films became an extremely important form of social entertainment during the interwar period. No other cultural institution had as much power to sway public opinion or to disseminate information as the film industry maintained in those years. While numerous film narratives depicted the "forgotten ones" sympathetically, as they had also been portrayed by FSA photographers, many more insidious cinematic interpretations appeared whenever someone from the upper-class took on the persona or ownership of the image. The complexity of this co-optation can be found in various scenarios where someone from the upper-classes was "recognized" and returned to his or her rightful place in society, or someone from the lower economic levels of white-collar workers is "recognized" by a movie producer, or someone of similar influence and power, who then changes the worker's fortune.

I argue that the most important contribution of filmic discourse to the construction of the American common man scenario existed in the narratives centered on class conflation, specifically to identify the ruling class as a benevolent community member. More than any other medium, film offered positive representations of the upper-class at a time when wealthy businessmen and upper-class lifestyles were otherwise disdained in public discourses.

Cinema performed two special national functions in the 1930s: (1) it re-elaborated the concept of Americanism as a mass culture, and as an industry, and (2) it moved toward a more unified national organization. The fact that various class, regional, and ethnic groups could see the same film in the same theater added to the homogenization of the message and the market. Like FDR, filmmakers aimed at a large public, identified sympathetically as "the people" rather than the faceless masses. And like Roosevelt, movies in the 1930s enjoyed their greatest popularity among the less well-to-do classes. The common ability to enjoy the thrilling decadence of the exotic, extravagant, and luxurious movie palace seemed "democratic" when all of these elements united within one cinema.

The Depression changed the way Hollywood worked, and in turn film impacted government like no other popular discourse. The industry itself took a radical step that would influence the content of movies for the next 30 years when, in 1934, Hollywood leaders created the Motion Picture Production Code. This system ruled American film production until the mid-1950s, when its influence declined, finally dying in the mid-1960s. The Hays Code was the industry's self-imposed censorship office created in
response to threats of federal censorship of content and legal destruction of Hollywood’s restrictive economic structure, which permitted studios to control production, distribution, and theatrical exhibition.\footnote{Vasey, 60.} The Hays Code standards allowed and to some extent encouraged motion picture writers to preach to audiences concerning appropriate and inappropriate ways of carrying out their highly recommended quest for the American Dream.

Possibly the best evidence that Hollywood was fully aware of its power and influence in sculpting a national identity resides in a 1928 internal MMPPDA memo which stated:

\begin{quote}
Motion pictures . . . are demonstrably the greatest single factors in the Americanization of the world and as such fairly may be called the most important and significant of America’s exported products.

They are such indirect and un-designed propaganda for the purveying of national ideals, modes of life, methods of thought and standards of living as no other country in the world has ever enjoyed.\footnote{As quoted in Vasey, 43.}

Might not an industry memo read much the same today?
\end{quote}
Conclusion

As I have argued in this study, the period between 1929 and 1940 marks a pivotal point in United States cultural identity formation particularly as it relates to social class definition. I have presented examples of how media produced by government-sponsored programs and the film industry, and particularly the oral rhetorical presentations of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, contributed to the contradictory concepts of the nation as both a "classless" and a "middle-class" society. FDR used his mastery of persuasion and rhetorical technique to establish unity through the rhetorical appropriation of "commonness" in reference to social classes, race and ethnic affiliations, tensions among native-born and immigrant labor, industrialization, and the economic distresses of the Great Depression.

While it may not be possible to find an intrinsic cultural character, it is nonetheless what cultural historians search for and what makes cultural history possible. In a moment of global awareness, such as here at the beginning of the 21st century, it is never far from our collective understanding that every cultural entity has a unique character. We joke about the arrogance of the French, the fundamentalism of those in the Middle East, the "ball-breaking" of feminists, or the flamboyance of gay men, whether it denotes a truth or not. We stamp "culture(s)" with characteristics so that we may define and order them. I have argued that the character and identity of the U.S. as a classless, yet mono-class of "middle" class citizens, was largely shaped during the pivotal era of the interwar period, specifically during the Great Depression. It is, of course, the period when our contemporary image of the American "melting pot" was formed, and yet, simultaneously denied in the cultural psyche. It was also an important time of transitions and paradoxes which contributed to our contemporary self-image of America. We are all the products of our national ancestry and to understand collective and individual selves we must look to our past.

The method of my study was based on Michael C. McGee's concept of the "critic as inventor," meaning that my analysis was formed around "fragments" of cultural knowledge as they existed in one historical period. Piecing together fragments of allegorical myths or cultural wisdom led me to consider the paradoxical formation of the myth of America as a classless/middle-class society. Through public discourses regarding democracy, capitalism, governmental agency, social reform, and the myth of
universal Americanism, I explained how the tropes "forgotten man" and "common man" were used rhetorically to unify an otherwise disparate population.

Following McGee's lead, I have exposed cultural assumptions, conventions, and selections as they related to cultural knowledge and practice during the interwar period. I have provided a context for the recognition of cultural myths regarding the paradoxical assumptions of U.S. society as both classless and yet somehow a nation of middle-class citizens. I reiterate here that my study focuses on the myths of class positions as they formed during the interwar period, not necessarily the empirical reality of class positions as American citizens experienced social positions then and now.

The depth of this study was limited, in some respect, to its interdisciplinary nature. Space alone prohibits one from contextualizing each medium or discipline with additional attention to history, events, cultural psychology, or theoretical analysis. I leave it to the reader or subsequent scholars to pursue these areas in greater depth. Lengthy discussion of individual texts regarding visual rhetoric, audience reception, or attention to individual artists/authors was deliberately limited to a general analysis so that attention remained focused on my argument that these cultural texts, as a whole, contributed to the formation of the nation's identity regarding social class. Further study would include more definitive explorations of various media and the inter-relational contributions of each to cultural identity formation.

Transforming the Forgotten Underclass into the Mythic Middle-class Common Man

Beginning with a reference to the "forgotten man" from a mid-19th century essay by William Graham Sumner, Franklin Roosevelt initiated a representation of the average American citizen in a centralized class position which he referred to as the common man. In Chapter One, I explained the impact of Roosevelt's rhetorical image of the common man as it was conflated with the forgotten man. Using the mythic image of the forgotten man as a marker for anyone feeling left out, overlooked, or completely forgotten by their government, Roosevelt fashioned a representative identity of the average American citizen, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, immigrant or social class status. Though many of FDR's speeches produced important and profound phrases, the trope of the forgotten man seemed to resonate most clearly with the American public until U.S. entry into World War II.
The mythic forgotten man functioned as a marker for FDR's common man, bringing those who felt most vulnerable and forgotten by the economic instability and changing nature of the economy and society into a unified group of American citizens. I argued that the identity of the "forgotten man" was claimed by Americans from all classes, not just the ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed. Strengthening Roosevelt's exploitation of the forgotten man image were other forms of visual and aural popular media, which taken as a whole, contributed to the myth of the “average” American character, as exemplified in Roosevelt’s rhetoric of the common man. Inevitably, both phrases were co-opted by members of the nascent white-collar class who emerged as the central figures in American national and cultural identification. FDR’s rhetoric alone could not have persuaded the country to mold itself into the image of a “mono-class” of “middle” Americans by itself, but his comprehension of the working man in democratic society coupled with references drawn from popular culture, proved highly persuasive in communicating his desires to “the people” of the United States.

Through these representative texts the rhetorical image of the forgotten ones took form. As illustrated in Chapter Two, the team of photographers working for the Farm Security Administration provided vivid visual texts which made the forgotten man no longer an invisible figure of Roosevelt’s rhetoric, but a tangible reminder of the ill-housed, ill-fed, and ill-clothed. Perhaps the most powerful use of FSA photos was their function as tools of legislative persuasion, but a less measurable result of their success might be in how these images reminded white-collar (middle) class viewers that things were really not so bad. At least they were not like "those" people.

I argued that photographs taken for the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration served a practical purpose in the 1930s, not only in making economic hardship visible so that action might be taken to alter social deprivation, but also in bridging the psychological distance between poverty and security through the visual dynamic of documentary photography. In so doing, the government could claim that, despite factual evidence represented via photographic “documents,” the economic difference between subject and viewer was secondary to the metaphor of equality evoked in these photographs. The construction of this ideological façade is particularly relevant to the way agricultural workers and the rural poor were represented to a white-
collar urban audience. Sympathy was elicited, concern was voiced, and the American people who were not the focus of FSA images responded to the need that was displayed before them. The central message contained in FSA images was clear: poverty was not an acceptable part of American society and therefore must be eased, if not eradicated, for the mutual benefit of both the subject and the viewer of government photography.

The "otherness" of FSA subjects has continued to be the most pervasive legacy of work produced by FSA photographers. The metaphorical power of these photos seems only to grow, as does the distance in time between the past and the present. Unfortunately, in the end, Roosevelt's rhetoric of bringing these forgotten members of society back "into-the-fold" must be judged as a failure. The poor of all races and geographic areas remain ill-housed, ill-fed, and ill-clothed into the 21st century, never fully achieving the social status of the "common" man.

Running parallel to the construction of the forgotten man image in FSA photographs was the image of the common man constructed in WPA/FAP public murals. Here, the representation of the average American echoed Roosevelt's rhetoric regarding the common man as a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant. In Chapter Three I also illustrated how murals produced under government-sponsorship did much to rebuild self-confidence and construct a self-image of Americans and their history. Artworks resulting from WPA/FAP relief programs supported FDR's rhetoric about the average American as a worker happy to serve the country for the benefit of a greater good. Portrayals of Americans and American history in these public artworks denied the tumultuous relationships among genders, races, and classes, because they visually ignored the existence of such issues by depicting Americans as they wished themselves, and their history, to be: a harmonious “melting pot” of like minded citizens working for the shared rewards of democracy and capitalism.

Artists working for the WPA/FAP created artworks that re-constructed and re-defined the American understanding of democracy as a classless ideology and practice, while implicitly maintaining traditional notions about social class distinctions and how one fit into a class position. Therefore, WPA/FAP artists contributed to the construction of cultural identity that FDR and New Deal intellectuals defined and structured as an idealized image of the American citizen based on their concept of a democratic nation.

315 Ellis, 5.
To do so, they created images depicting the "average" man or woman as a good worker/citizen. While images of both blue and white-collar laborers typified their work, visual codes supportive of citizenship, social order, and democracy merged into one representative composite figure: a white Protestant person of northern European descent. Within this particular public medium, the trope of the "forgotten man" was transformed into the common man: a white, middle-class, Protestant (typically) white-collar worker. It was also the one medium where fiction and reality merged with past and future to form a wholly universalized image of the common American: an idealized citizen as FDR nebulously described him and her.

I have also argued that government programs were not the only sources of visual and oral rhetoric which universalized the American character and culture. Films -- the focus of discussion in Chapter Four -- in particular furthered the visual rhetoric of disempowerment and passivity that covered a hidden essence at the core of the American character: faith in the almighty, generosity of spirit, the ethics of hard work, and a trust that democracy would provide equal opportunity for all citizens. I reasoned that motion pictures had an enormous influence on cultural identity formation during the interwar period. Through a highly organized system of production and distribution, the motion picture industry reached all regions of the country, all classes, races, ages, and genders. Perceiving its audience as a single entity of like minded spectators, just as advertising agencies advocated, Hollywood studios fashioned the image of the common viewer much like that of Roosevelt's rhetorical common man. In attempts to encourage Americanism, Roosevelt's rhetoric, New Deal strategies, and Hollywood studios catered to WASP ideals and the mythic American Dream in constructing their representative characterizations of the average consumer/citizen: i.e. common American.

No other cultural institution had as much power to sway public opinion or to disseminate information as the film industry maintained in those years. While numerous film narratives depicted the "forgotten ones" sympathetically, as they had also been portrayed by FSA photographers, many more insidious cinematic interpretations appeared whenever someone, working or living in a lower social position but from the upper classes, took on the persona or ownership of the image. Film offered positive representations of the upper class at a time when wealthy businessmen and upper class lifestyles were otherwise disdained in public discourses. The complexity of this co-optation can be found in various scenarios where someone from the upper classes is
"recognized" and returned to his or her rightful place in society, or someone from the lower economic levels of white-collar workers is "recognized" by a movie producer, or someone of similar influence and power, who then changes the worker's fortune. I argued that the most important contribution of filmic discourse to the construction of the American common man scenario existed in the narratives centered on class conflation, specifically the identification of members of the ruling class as benevolent community members.

Finally, no one media was responsible for creating a representative image of the "common (forgotten) man." Rather, each media contributed to the discourses on democracy, citizenship, capitalism, Americanism, and economic transformation in unique and vital ways. In the end, concepts about social order regarding race, class, and gender were hardly affected by the reforms of New Deal policy, but the concepts of America as a mono-class or classless society--as an ideal image of democracy--was elevated to new heights. Consequently, the importance of visual rhetoric formulated in public forms of visual communication was vital to constructing a national identity, mythology, and history.

**Losing the Battle but Winning the War**

On Dec. 7, 1941, the moment the U.S. entered World War II, FDR's rhetorical construct of the average American as a "common" man was solidified. Immigrants no longer clung to their national identities and ties to the "old" world. Disputes between labor and business ceased to matter, lengthy lines of unemployed workers disappeared, and factories, business, and government readied themselves for combat. Sharing this focus united the many disparate factions vying for power and ideological control during the Depression. As Robert McElvaine stated, "'Dr. New Deal' had been replaced by 'Dr. Win the War.'"316

World War II and the resulting changes in American society regarding work (particularly as it affected women and African Americans), national identity, and economic recovery was in many ways a positive application of the liberal reforms to social order and cultural identity which had to that point not resulted from New Deal reforms and legislation. Had the war not made these situations possible, it is likely that the myths of American society as a unified semblance of "common," middle-class

citizens benefiting from a democracy which provided opportunity for all, might not have ever occurred. Though, as historians Robert McElvaine, T.H. Watkins, and Anthony J. Badger have explained, the New Deal had begun to decline in impact years before FDR focused his attention on the war.

T. H. Watkins offers one perspective regarding the change in social psychology and economic practices resulting from New Deal initiatives. Watkins states, "as with many of their hopes, much of what [the New Deal administration] tried would prove to be so bound up in a snarl of conflicting instincts and ideologies that it either fell short of what was planned for it or actually made things worse."317

The paradoxical nature of the American public during the interwar period also contributed to the inability of New Deal policies to become permanent social reforms. As McElvaine wrote, "Americans love the benefits of bigness, but cherish the simpler, more personal economy of an earlier time. Our ideal is individualism, but we covet the efficiency and comfort provided by large organization."318 The value system which emerged from the paradoxical and often disparate ideologies during the Depression resulted in a redefined understanding of American individualism. As McElvaine so rightly stated, the values evident in films by Capra, Ford, Huston, and others, as well as those images created by FSA photographers and WPA artists, belonged to the mythic past. The rugged individualism of the pioneer/cowboy suited Americans' need for a usable past when their reality was better denied. In contrast, a concept of cooperative individualism simultaneously gained attention. This revised form of American individualism recognized the individual as unique but only in so far as he or she worked cooperatively within society. It was, as McElvaine describes, a value system different from the acquisitive individualism of the pioneer or cowboy and instead was one of moral individualism.319 This change in attitude must have contributed to the merging of social class identities as well since it supported the concepts of unification toward one cultural image.

Roosevelt's New Deal administration (primarily centered in his first two terms as President) inextricably linked the American public with its government in ways that no other administration had or has since that time. Government became a daily part of

American society through legislation defining social security, labor, and the increased power of the presidential office, not to mention the attention given to political character inherently affected by the ebullient charm, wit, and friendly nature of Franklin Roosevelt himself.

Despite the overwhelming approval of FDR as a man, demonstrated by voter reactions, his ability to lead the congress and implement much of what the "first" New Deal programs promised was ultimately limited by his own focus, some would say vengeance, toward the Congress and Supreme Court during 1938. FDR's anger toward the Court for its actions against the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) may have limited his ability to focus on other avenues for progressing New Deal programs and legislation.320

Roosevelt's inability to pass legislation through Congress, his attempt to "pack" the Supreme Court for presidential advantage, and the brief recession of 1937-1938 mark the beginning of the end for the progressive initiatives instituted during his first term as President (1933-1937). In the spring of 1939 it became increasingly clear that the United States could not ignore assaults posed by Germany and Italy toward their European neighbors. On April 24, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a War Department appropriation of more than $508 million dollars for fiscal year 1940. They must have sensed that U.S. isolationism would not protect them from the havoc occurring abroad.

Anthony Badger espouses that even if Roosevelt had handled the Court-packing episode with less animosity, the conservative tide was already growing as a result of the 1937-1938 recession and because, at the core, Americans remained relatively conventional regarding the radical actions posed by New Deal recovery and relief programs. Consequently, the activism of Roosevelt's first term as President and the optimism New Deal programs offered did not come to fruition once the economy began to recover and people returned to their pre-Depression expectations regarding government, the economy, and social orders. Badger attributes the lack of long term success by the New Deal administration to the forces of localism; the conservatism of ordinary Americans and their elected officials, particularly those from the West and South; the fate of Marxist radicalism; the performance of state governors; the revival of

320 Watkins, The Hungry Years, 508.
the Republican Party; and "the individualistic and anti-statist ideology of the dissident demagogues."\textsuperscript{321}

**Interpreting the Past for our Present**

Seventy some years after the dawning of the Great Depression, Americans find themselves once again in a moment of crisis. In the Presidential election of 2000, we were reminded that American democracy is far from perfect. The debacle that occurred in voting booths across the country, though most obviously in the state of Florida, raised questions as to the efficiency of America’s electoral processes, the influence of capitalism on politics, and the integrity of politicians. Questions of economy and the American practice of capitalism were as much a part of this election, and this period in history, as they were during the 1930s in the decade later designated as “The Great Depression.” Despite obvious differences between the prosperity of the year 2000 and the economic devastation of the 1930s, I am reminded of history’s oft-noted tendency to repeat itself and how each new generation must face issues of morality and justice, and their interaction with democracy and capitalism.

The status of reforms set in place during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s tenure as President of the United States remain among the most heated topics of debate among politicians today. Seventy years later homelessness is widespread, social programs such as social security for the elderly, disabled, or widowed and orphaned, and those who need additional financial support for children or healthcare, are being dismembered or seriously threatened by collapse. And once again, new technologies are changing the course of labor and industry. Hostility toward migrants in California is now aimed at Mexicans and Asians rather than Okies, and the “red” unions that ruled California politics in the thirties. Attempts to abolish fundamental worker gains, such as over-time-pay, an eight-hour work day, and affirmative action hiring procedures, are once again topics of national and international debate.\textsuperscript{322}

From an early 21\textsuperscript{st} century vantage point, images of the Great Depression may seem incomprehensible, and yet it is important to remind ourselves that we may view texts from history as the seeds of our present. With historical distance and critical analysis, I have considered the value of one particular cultural trope, the forgotten


\textsuperscript{322} Ben Clarke, "Introduction to Image and Imagination: Encounters with the Photography of Dorothea Lange" (1997), 1. [http://www.jps.net/voices/langclar.htm](http://www.jps.net/voices/langclar.htm)
(common) man, for its function as an ideological agent of popular and political propaganda, and for how it served in the construction of a national identity. The continued use of FSA photographs in films (such as *Seabiscuit*, 2003, and numerous book covers, etc.) reminds us of why our system of public welfare was initially established and prompts us to consider the trials we still face as a nation. We continue to battle with economic and social disparities among classes, genders, and races, the disenfranchised, or the nationally alienated. And, unfortunately, an individual’s social status remains intimately connected to economic status, revealing deep flaws in our ability to maintain identity as "one nation."

Since circumstances of the interwar period so curiously resemble those of the early 21st century, it seems appropriate to repeatedly question how oppression has been practiced and institutionalized in the formation of national culture and identity. I have illustrated how ideological structures perpetuate oppression and maintain certain forms of social order and social control in the 1930s. Only through this kind of questioning may we respond accordingly with a new understanding of our nation’s culture and consciousness. Flawed as they may be, the images left to us from government agencies endowed with the task of recording certain “truths” about a specific time and place in American history have provided us with a rich legacy of American challenges and the resolve with which they were confronted.

Work from the RA/FSA photographers and WPA/FAP artists has continued to affect notions of American history in the 1930’s. Many murals still exist in rural post offices or courthouses, and photographs taken of southern and mid-western tenant farmers and migrant workers remain permanently etched in the minds of Americans through their continued use on posters, book covers, in photography books, and even on mouse pads. The significance of these constructed “documents” to a contemporary reader should not go unheeded. RA/FSA photographs presented compelling documentation of events that had a major impact on people during the Depression. It is to the credit of the men and women who produced this visual legacy that we now have insights into the complexity and richness of our history.

Images shot by RA/FSA photographers were chosen for their universal qualities and made to symbolize the abstract rather than the specific. Part of the complex result of FSA photographs was a form of social control, in the sense that the subjects of the photographs seldom rose above the level of symbol. The making of individual images
and hardships into a universal is powerful propaganda, but it also supported the class, race, and gender stratifications in society at that time. It was this mythic construction of the un-propertied and disenfranchised members of limited economic power who came to visually represent the forgotten man. Though it was typical of RA/FSA photographers to use visual rhetoric in order to engage empathy from their viewers, for many, the unintended result was the creation of a class of victims, who continued to be seen as the Other, and/or as a drain on public resources.

Political rhetoric regarding the forgotten man has been updated to conform to contemporary parlance. For example, it is politically incorrect to assume the forgotten man is a white male. Maybe because we are now more gender-blind, the forgotten man trope has been transformed to the phrase "working-poor." Such a phrase typically indicates a class of single mothers or illegal immigrants who fall between the economic crevasses of those who live on welfare and those who exist in the "middle" class, with jobs that provide health care and retirement benefits. This contemporary class of forgotten ones is as invisible as migrant workers and tenant sharecroppers and their living conditions were prior to exposure by RA/FSA photographers, just as the common man trope has become synonymous with the working "middle" class citizen whether her or she be in the blue or white-collar sector.

Finally, as I have stated previously, no one politician or media can be held responsible or given credit for establishing the mythic American identity as both a classless and middle-class society. Both myths remain as nebulous today as they did during the interwar period, but they consistently appear in political and popular culture rhetorical discourses. The study I presented here should be considered one critic's analysis of how these myths were rhetorically formed, how they functioned, and were sustained to the present moment in American cultural identity. Had FDR not fashioned the rhetorical image of the forgotten man, nor transformed that image into the common man, had the Depression of the 1930s or our response to it not created the opportunity to visually chronicle American lived experience, or had films not reflected the cultural values and customs of that era, certainly our present would be other than it is. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the rhetoric of that era fashioned our present, it would be fair to say that it contributed to the mythos by which we view our past.
Select Bibliography


--------- "State Power and Cultural Discourse." *Block 13*, Winter, 1987,


--------- “American Art and the New Deal.” *American Studies* 6, no. 3.


Lazarsfeld, Paul F. Radio and the Printed Page. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940.

--------- "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." in Western Journal of Speech Communication, 54 (Summer 1990), 274-289.


Moley, Raymond. Are We Movie Made?. New York: Macy-Masius, 1938.


-------- Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.


**Websites:**

Questia Media America, Inc. [http://www.questia.com/](http://www.questia.com/)
New Deal Network: [http://newdeal.feri.org/ndart/art04.htm](http://newdeal.feri.org/ndart/art04.htm)
Roosevelt Library: [http://fdrlibrary.marist.edu/](http://fdrlibrary.marist.edu/)
Karal Ann Marling Collection:[http://www.cwru.edu/UL/SpecColl/Marling/MarlingSum.htm](http://www.cwru.edu/UL/SpecColl/Marling/MarlingSum.htm)
Ben Clarke, "Introduction to Image and Imagination: Encounters with the Photography of Dorothea Lange" (1997), 1. [http://www.jps.net/voices/langclar.htm](http://www.jps.net/voices/langclar.htm)