



**BENJAMIN L. ALPERS**



**Dictators,  
Democracy,  
& American Public Culture**

**ENVISIONING THE TOTALITARIAN ENEMY  
1920s-1950s**



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# **Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture**

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To Karin Schutjer,

Noah Schutjer Alpers, and

Mira Schutjer Alpers



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# **Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture**



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# INTRODUCTION

This book is the history of a conventional wisdom. For much of the twentieth century, Americans understood democracy, and their own political identity as Americans, largely in opposition to modern dictatorship. Americans couched many of their fiercest political struggles in the language of opposition to dictatorship, whether engaging in the Popular Front's campaigns against fascism or the second Red Scare's campaigns against communism, whether arguing against Jim Crow laws as akin to Nazi racial policies or opposing the civil rights movement as a tyrannical imposition of centralized authority, whether fighting against Hitler in World War II or against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Even President Bill Clinton, in his largely unremarkable second inaugural address, boldly claimed for his first administration the ultimate foreign policy success: "For the first time in all of history, more people on this planet live under democracy than under dictatorship."

Despite their central role in our political culture, American understandings of dictatorship have received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Like much conventional wisdom, the place of dictatorship in American political culture has become naturalized: dictatorship simply *is* democracy's opposite, though all would probably acknowledge that there have been heated battles over what counts as a dictatorship and what we should consider a democracy. However, there is nothing necessary about the peculiar and central role that dictatorship has played in the political life of this country. In the late twentieth century Americans treated dictatorship and democracy as the only two political options available to a society, as Clinton's claim suggests. Yet for most of the history of Western political thought, dictatorship and democracy were regarded as only two of many possible forms of political organization—among them, tyranny, aristocracy, and monarchy. Although dictatorship and democracy were certainly distinct from one another, they were not complete opposites. In the political thought of the ancient world, dictatorship was a temporary measure that could be adopted by any polity in times of emergency, especially war. This classical notion was invoked even in the United States to justify the policies of President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and President Woodrow Wilson dur-

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ing World War I. Some nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century political theory suggested yet another relationship between dictatorship and democracy. Marxist social democrats embraced the notion of a dictatorship of the proletariat as not only compatible with true democracy, but also a necessary step toward achieving it.

Throughout the twentieth century, American understandings of dictatorship were rooted in interpretations of events abroad, especially in Europe. Of course, many non-European nations have had dictatorships, and these have been of tremendous concern to U.S. observers. However, the regimes of Europe have been the models for American imaginings of dictatorship for a variety of reasons. First, Europe has been the crucible of modern political ideologies. The French Revolution in many ways pioneered modern dictatorship. More recently, Italian Fascism, German Nazism, and Soviet Communism—each a product of Europe—have dominated American understandings of the phenomenon and have underlain many dictatorships elsewhere in the world. Second, Europe has always loomed larger than other regions in the self-understandings of American elites, whose forebears tended to come from Europe. Although Europe has often been considered to be a cultural exemplar, politically the Old World has often been seen not as a model, but as a warning, a sign of what could happen to the United States if it were somehow to stumble. The modern European dictatorships easily fit into this line of thought in ways that non-European dictatorships never have. Americans have variously feared that the nation might descend the path taken by Germany in 1933 or Russia in 1917; few if any Americans worried in the 1930s that the United States would become like Japan or, more recently, Iraq. These non-European regimes are understood as utterly Other, their danger entirely external (though, as with Japanese Americans during World War II, fear of that danger has led many Americans to deny others their rights as U.S. citizens).

In part as a result of the importance of events overseas, American views of dictatorship exhibit another common quality of conventional wisdom: they have been defined largely by a series of conversations among a heterogeneous set of cultural elites. By labeling something a “conventional wisdom,” we acknowledge its constructed or *conventional* quality. And when we talk of conventional wisdom, at least in its current usage, we are usually referring to the conventions of the political elite. A comparatively small group of men and women has been in a position to interpret events abroad to American mass audiences and suggest an answer to the question of dictatorship. This group has included, among others, professors, policymakers, speechwriters, presidents, filmmakers, novelists, and business leaders. In

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this work I refer to these people collectively as “cultural producers.” I use the phrase not to reduce the various and complicated social roles of the people grouped under this term, but to indicate a social space that was shared by these individuals and denied to others. The production of works about dictatorship in American public culture was limited to a fairly select group of people. Whether by virtue of having special access to one of the mass media (screenwriters or novelists), of having expert status (German refugee scholars, political scientists, or U.S. government officials), or of having both (foreign correspondents), these cultural producers have enjoyed bully pulpits from which to instruct the broader public about dictatorship. Their perspectives were not unquestioned but they were, in the Gramscian sense, hegemonic. They have profoundly shaped American political culture in the mid-to-late twentieth century. They have defined what views were “mainstream” and what views were “extreme.”

The history of this conventional wisdom begins in the 1920s. The press praised Mussolini for single-handedly bringing order to Italy’s political life. Many saw a similar quality in Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan. In the early years of the Great Depression, dictatorship was an important political fantasy for a heterogeneous group of Americans. Although most Americans were not attracted to dictatorship, for some it seemed necessary in light of the socio-economic crisis, either as a permanent, more efficient solution to the problems of modern life or, in the classical sense, as a temporary measure to put democracy back on course. *Barron’s*, the conservative business weekly, hoped in February 1933 that the newly elected and yet-to-be-inaugurated Franklin Delano Roosevelt might act as a “semi-dictator” to save America from social chaos. Liberal filmmaker Walter Wanger produced *Gabriel over the White House* (1933), a political fantasy in which a president solves the country’s problems by becoming a divinely inspired dictator. The Communist Party (CP), in its ideologically militant “Third Period,” declared that capitalist, bourgeois democracy was already doomed and that the only real political choice was between a communist dictatorship of the proletariat and a fascist dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

By the second half of the 1930s this had changed. Dictatorship became the evil against which nearly everyone in American political life struggled. Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) leader John L. Lewis declared in 1936 that the greatest question facing American workers was “whether the working population of this country shall have the voice in determining their destiny or whether they shall serve as indentured servants for a financial and economic dictatorship that would shamelessly exploit our resources.”<sup>1</sup> The Popular Front strategy, adopted by many liberals, radicals,



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and the Communist Party, sought to organize all political effort around the struggle between democracy and fascism. Although it is today correctly remembered as a document entirely honored in the breach, the Soviet Union's Constitution of 1936 formally recognized political and civil liberties and thus enabled Communists and the much larger group of those generally sympathetic to Russia to argue that the Soviet Union itself was well on its way to embracing democracy. Their opponents on the anti-Stalinist left and liberal anticommunists argued that the USSR was a dictatorship as brutal as Nazi Germany. Toward the end of the decade, the Roosevelt administration, interested in nudging the country toward intervention in Europe, backed what Leo Ribuffo has called the "Brown Scare," raising fears that America was threatened by a Nazi "fifth column." Anti-interventionists, on the other hand, argued that U.S. involvement in the European war might lead to dictatorship. Republicans saw signs of dictatorship in FDR's 1940 quest for a third term and donned buttons that read, "Third Reich. Third International. Third Term."<sup>2</sup> In an interventionist tract, published just before the collapse of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, William Dow Boutwell, head of the Division of Radio, Publications, and Education in the U.S. Office of Education, captured the situation effectively:

American leaders are united in their distaste for totalitarian governments. Like President Coolidge's minister who was "against sin," they are, with almost no exception, "against totalitarianism." Yet each finds a different "sin" in dictatorship. The men who want wider freedom for corporate business fear totalitarian "collectivism." Writers, poets, artists are against dictators because dictators restrict freedom of expression. To labor leaders the liquidation of unions is the greatest threat. Religious leaders make the issue a holy war. Educator, farmer, scientist, merchant—each finds his central faith and interest imperiled, his own ox gored. They are all against totalitarian rule.<sup>3</sup>

Boutwell's statement captures another aspect of the growing conventional wisdom about dictatorship: by the late 1930s the word "totalitarian" and its substantive sibling "totalitarianism" were regularly applied to the European dictatorships.

Understanding the idea of totalitarianism as a product—and an important component—of 1930s U.S. political culture forces us to reconsider that political culture. To a great extent, our understandings of the political culture of the thirties have been products of a scholarly continuation of many political battles of that tumultuous decade. The era has been a favorite hunting ground for those in search of a usable past. The Popular Front

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(understood either as a movement led by the Communist Party or as a broad-based coalition of the left), the anti-Stalinist left, noninterventionists, liberal anticommunists, and New Dealers, among others, have each had their acolytes and their detractors among historians. Most recently, the CIO, usually as an object of celebration, has found itself in the center of many understandings of 1930s political culture. These studies have clearly illuminated the battle lines in American politics during the decade of depression. Taken together, such studies contribute to a rich understanding of the complexity of those political battles. Indeed, with the exception of World War II, the Great Depression is probably the most studied and debated period in the last century of the American past.

For historians, one of the attractions of the period has been the fascinating and complicated state of American politics. With world economic and political crises calling into question some of the most basic aspects of U.S. social, political, and economic life, it is not surprising that American writers and thinkers, as well as the public at large, adopted a wide range of political views. It is common to describe politics as a spectrum, ranging from left to right. This terminology, derived originally from the way in which parties were seated in the constituent assembly during the French Revolution, is significant, both because it is the way that most modern Western political actors have understood their own politics and because it allows us to draw some admittedly rough comparisons between the politics of our own time and the politics of the past. But if we cannot avoid talking in terms of a left-right spectrum, we should acknowledge the limitations of this model. Politics takes place in many dimensions and cannot be reduced to a single one. Often, people's own descriptions of their politics owe more to the rhetorical requirements of the day than to an unchanging political spectrum: today, politicians avoid the word "liberal" like the plague; in the 1930s few wanted the label "conservative." Moreover, unlike an optical spectrum, which naturally divides into a series of separate colors, we can, and often must, group political actors in a variety of ways. With all these caveats in mind, I will try to provide a roadmap of American politics in the 1930s and early 1940s from left to right.

The American left of the 1930s was large and heterogeneous. Those located on the left in this book believed that modern capitalism was in one way or another fundamentally flawed and urged a radical transformation of American society to distribute goods more democratically. There were many ideological splits within this left. Among the most salient of these divisions—both in later decades and for the purposes of this study—was the division between the Communist Party and its sympathizers on the one

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hand and the anti-Stalinist left on the other. Although small and deeply opposed to coalition politics at the start of the depression, the CP grew to become the most influential left-wing party in the middle of the decade when it adopted the Popular Front strategy of encouraging most left-of-center parties to band together to oppose fascism. The Popular Front tent ended up encompassing a diverse set of groups and individuals (some more liberal than leftist), drawn together by antifascist, antiracist, and pro-labor politics and a sincere, if misguided, belief that the Soviet Union stood in the forefront of such efforts around the world.

The non-Stalinist (or anti-Stalinist) left was smaller, but even more variegated. Its ranks included Marxist-Leninists who contended that Stalin had betrayed the Russian Revolution: Trotskyists and quasi-Trotskyists, among them many intellectuals associated with the *Partisan Review* in the late 1930s and the 1940s; Lovestoneites, who were associated with the Bukharinite critique of Stalinism; and a variety of independent Marxist thinkers. Many, like the young Sidney Hook, left, or were expelled from, the CP during the ideological warfare of the 1920s and early 1930s and later drifted in and out of various groups on the sectarian left. The non-Stalinist left also included individuals and groups from other radical traditions, including the old Socialist Party, then led by Norman Thomas. Although much less visible than the Popular Front, anti-Stalinist leftists were intellectually very important in the development of the American critique of dictatorship. Many, though by no means all, of them moved steadily rightward over the course of the 1930s and 1940s.

Liberalism stood at the center of the nation's politics in the 1930s, though it was itself undergoing change. Franklin Roosevelt might stand as a perfect symbol for American liberalism during this decade. First and foremost a political experimentalist, FDR would try a variety of approaches, often simultaneously, to solve the problems facing America in depression and war. While liberals tended to embrace the notion of a vigorous federal government, their other commitments were extraordinarily various. Although some shared the belief that U.S. social and economic life needed to be fundamentally transformed to meet the challenges of the modern world, liberals were generally gradualists. They tended to place a lot of hope in the New Deal and Roosevelt's leadership. Those pushing for radical change often allied themselves with the Popular Front or other parts of the left; I have identified them as "left liberals" in this book. Other liberals—like Dorothy Thompson, who was both one of the leading antifascist voices in the American media and a Republican whose support for FDR wavered on a number of occasions—welcomed an aggressive federal response to the

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worldwide economic and political crises but were suspicious of fundamental transformations in American capitalism and democracy; I have designated such people “moderate liberals.”

Finally, there was the beleaguered American right. If support for FDR defined 1930s liberalism, opposition to him largely characterized 1930s conservatism. Anti-New Dealers included much of the southern wing of the Democratic Party, as well as a large portion of the Republican Party, especially its conservative wing, which was strongest in the Midwest. If most of America loved FDR, his enemies hated him. Indeed, for much of the right, FDR himself became a symbol of dictatorship. Some of the most prominent voices on the right, such as former president Herbert Hoover, were most concerned about federal intervention in the economic marketplace. Others, like many white Southern Democrats, worried about the demands for racial justice emanating from the left. Further to the right lay a variety of individuals and groups often accused (fairly or unfairly) of representing the beginnings of American fascism, including various proponents of reactionary populism, most famously Huey Long and Father Coughlin; fundamentalist leaders of the old Christian right like Reverend Gerald Winrod; and even a small number of self-identified fascists, such as Lawrence Dennis.

By the middle of the decade, a political division very important for this study began to cut across this rough spectrum: the rift over intervention in the growing European crisis. With the start of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938, and the invasion of Poland in 1939, Americans faced the question of whether, and how, to intervene in Europe. Although history has tended to associate the interventionist position with liberals and the left and the noninterventionist (or isolationist, as interventionists were apt to call it) position with the right, in fact the division was more complicated. Although many of the most prominent noninterventionists, such as *Chicago Tribune* publisher Colonel Robert McCormick, were conservatives, boisterous opponents of intervention also included noted liberals like United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis. And following the Nazi-Soviet Pact in the summer of 1939, the Communist Party, and those who chose to go along with it, abruptly switched from strong support for intervention in Europe to equally strong opposition, only to change course yet again when Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941.

Historians have done much to illuminate this complicated world of 1930s U.S. politics. But, despite its richness, the historiography has suffered from its reliance on the political divisions of that decade. Much that distinguished the political culture of the Great Depression cut across the political fault lines of the era. Drawing attention to these commonalities should

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in no way suggest that the differences between competing groups were any less real. Rather, such a focus can provide a valuable new understanding of the dynamics of the period. One of the reasons we write history is to rethink the past in ways that those who lived at the time could not have understood it. This is roughly how Richard Hofstadter, still one of the greatest students of American political culture, came to understand his own work. As he put it in a preface to *The American Political Tradition* written twenty years after the book's 1948 original publication: "I had been looking at certain characters in American political history not only somewhat from the political left but also from outside the tradition itself, and that from this external angle of vision the differences that seemed very sharp and decisive to those who dwelt altogether within it had begun to lose their distinctness, and that men on different sides of a number of questions appeared as having more in common, in the end, than one originally imagined."<sup>4</sup>

Although it is well established that the word "totalitarianism" was widely used in the United States by the late 1930s, thinking of the concept as a product of the thirties still strikes most historians as odd.<sup>5</sup> This is in large measure due to the extraordinary cultural power that the term, and its equation of communism with Nazism, accrued during the Cold War. To a certain extent, totalitarianism seems out of place in the Age of Roosevelt precisely because the concept seems so at home in the era of the Truman Doctrine. It is easy to reduce the popularity of the word "totalitarianism" during the 1930s to a kind of dramatic foreshadowing, a gun appearing in Act I that is doomed to go off in Act III. Such an explanation, however, is unsatisfying historically. Rather than dealing with the idea of totalitarianism in the age of the Popular Front, it replaces explanation with teleology. But historians are not wrong to regard the wide use of the term in the 1930s as an anomaly, for the notion of totalitarianism seems, in many ways, fundamentally at odds with 1930s political culture as we usually understand it.

The thirties are correctly remembered as a decade in which populism flourished in many forms. On the left, Upton Sinclair's *End Poverty in California* (EPIC) campaign, the rise of the CIO, and the growth of the Popular Front all represented different forms of populism. Father Coughlin and Huey Long were but the most famous heirs to the right-wing strain of American populism. In between were all sorts of liberal versions, from Roosevelt's rhetorical attack on "economic royalists" to the political fantasies of film director Frank Capra. The American populist tradition divides the world into "us" and "them." It typically imagines the great, virtuous mass of hardworking people arrayed against a small group of distant elites,

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bankers, bureaucrats, and the like.<sup>6</sup> At first glance, the populism of the 1930s easily fit this mold. Coughlin railed against Jewish bankers, Capra's Jefferson Smith battled corrupt U.S. senators, and the CIO's John L. Lewis railed against the "money trust" of Wall Street.

All of this seems very different from the Cold War fears of totalitarianism. The postwar critique of totalitarianism, at least as it developed among intellectuals in the United States such as Hannah Arendt, had at its core a critique of mass culture. Far from extolling the people, these intellectuals most often saw them, at least in their modern-day form, as the greatest potential source of political danger. Rootless, dispossessed of even folk culture, often fanatical, the modern masses were imagined not as sturdy preservers of individualism but as a "lonely crowd" that threatened American democracy.<sup>7</sup> Like populism's celebration of the people, such fears of the people had deep roots in American political culture. In the 1920s, for example, Walter Lippmann and a host of social scientists suggested that the vast majority of people in a modern society were incapable of rational political action.<sup>8</sup> But among American thinkers in the 1930s, we tend to associate such views with dissenters who felt out of step with the times, such as the anti-Stalinist left-wing critics identified with the *Partisan Review*.

Despite their celebration of the people, many Americans we connect with populism in the 1930s harbored fears of the masses. Usually, cultural producers tried to distinguish between the people, on the one hand, and the crowd on the other. But the distinction often proved hard to make, and as the decade wore on fear of the crowd often began to trump faith in the people. Frank Capra's social trilogy—*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941)—is usually seen as a locus classicus of the centrist variety of 1930s populism. But though honoring Deeds, Smith, and Doe as everyman heroes, these films see the biggest threat to the protagonists' success not in the scheming, corrupt elites but in the great mass of the people. This is especially true of the latter two productions. Senator Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), an idealistic political novice, is opposed in his plan to build a boys' summer camp by his state's corrupt senior senator Harrison Paine (Claude Rains). Paine and his political machine represent classic populist enemies: elites scheming against the interests of honest citizens like Smith and the boys of his home state. But Smith's darkest moment comes when thousands of his constituents, successfully rallied by the Paine machine, send letters to the floor of the U.S. Senate urging Smith to give up his plan. Although Smith represents average people, the people themselves are easily turned against him

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and become his most intractable opponents. Only when Paine, struck by a sudden bout of conscience, first attempts suicide and then confesses his corruption to the Senate is Smith able to get his project approved.

*Doe's* indictment of the people is even more direct. Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper), a minor-league baseball player turned hobo, is hired by a newspaper to play the role of "John Doe," in whose name columnist Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck) has been writing homey, populist truths. Willoughby/Doe is soon catapulted to radio stardom with the help of scripts written by Mitchell. Suspicious of posing as an authentic voice of the masses, Willoughby almost quits until he experiences firsthand how much strength ordinary people have gained from his messages. But Willoughby soon becomes an unknowing tool of the newspaper's publisher, D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold), who hopes to lead a quasi-fascist American political movement built on popular support for John Doe. When Willoughby discovers the plot, Norton easily turns the people against Doe by passing out flyers attacking him at a John Doe rally. As in *Smith* (and so many other Capra films), it takes an attempted suicide (in this case by Willoughby himself) to bring the people to their senses at the film's conclusion—regarded then and since as the least convincing part of the movie. As in *Smith*, populism and "the people" triumph in *Doe*. However, in both films the people are easily manipulated and prove to be the greatest threat to the hero's (and populism's) success.

Versions of late 1930s populism to the left of Capra also viewed the people in decidedly ambivalent ways. Orson Welles, for instance, was extremely active in the Popular Front theater, leading a series of Federal Theatre Project productions before striking out on his own by establishing the Mercury Theatre, which in turn migrated from the stage to radio and eventually to Hollywood. Welles was deeply concerned with democratizing the theater, creating stage and radio productions of classic plays and novels that would both engage current events and speak to the broadest possible audience. He also shared Capra's fascination with the media's ability to manipulate popular opinion. But even more than Capra, Welles had trouble imagining that the people could resist such manipulation. His famous "Blackshirt" stage presentation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* as an antifascist allegory portrayed the public as incapable of resisting propaganda. The 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, the most famous production of Welles's Mercury Theatre before *Citizen Kane*, displayed his skill at revealing to the public the ease with which it could be duped. Although Welles hoped to educate the audience about this manipulation, he was never able to portray—on stage, over the air, or on screen—such an

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unmanipulated public. Whereas the people were always Welles's imagined audience, his plays and films portrayed only the crowd.<sup>9</sup>

In Welles's case, and arguably in Capra's as well, the catalyst for this growing suspicion of the crowd was antifascism. American antifascism, which dated back to the 1920s, was particularly strong on the left. Nevertheless, a variety of Americans unconnected to the left, such as Dorothy Thompson, began to embrace it in the 1930s. In the early thirties some American observers, especially those on the left, came to regard fascism as a movement that simply represented the interests of an old, failing elite. In fact, in both Italy and Germany a traditionally conservative head of state (King Victor Emmanuel II in Italy and President Paul von Hindenburg in Germany) had invited the future fascist dictator to head the government. Such a view nicely dovetailed with that of Americans who admired Mussolini: for both fascism was a top-down affair.

But over the course of the 1930s, this portrayal of fascism came to be less and less tenable for many Americans. The absence of any strong domestic opposition in Germany and Italy and the new regimes' apparent ability to build mass support for huge and costly state projects—most spectacularly, wars of conquest—persuaded more and more U.S. observers that these regimes were based not in the singular authority of a dictator and his henchmen but rather in the often irrational desires of the masses. The move away from a cautious optimism about dictatorship in the early 1930s to the nearly universal condemnation of the phenomenon late in the decade was accompanied by a shift from dictator-centered to crowd-centered explanations of modern dictatorship. Such reasoning was relatively comfortable for many conservative critics, who could draw on a well-developed antimodernist critique of mass culture and who tended to focus on Soviet Communism, which they had long considered to be a mass movement. Similarly, critics connected with the small, anti-Stalinist left developed a scathing analysis of mass culture that became a substantial part of their indictment of Stalinism, fascism, and capitalism alike.

For liberals and leftists associated with the Popular Front, however, understanding fascism as essentially a mass phenomenon was intellectually and ideologically more difficult. The Popular Front eagerly embraced mass culture. It placed great hope in the ability of mass media such as film, popular theater, radio, and magazines to function, in Michael Denning's phrase, as a "cultural front" in the struggle against fascism. Whereas "Third Period" Communism had talked incessantly of "the proletariat," the Popular Front tended to speak of "the people." For Orson Welles, Max Lerner, Lewis Mumford, Richard Wright, and many others on the American left, understand-



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