Studies in American Political Development, 19 (Spring 2005), 98–102.

Reflections on Americanism

Gary Gerstle, *University of Maryland*

Charles Williams's essay on the nature of progressive Americanism takes me back to where my quest to understand this phenomenon began: the labor movement of the 1930s. The broad nature and intensity of working-class rebellion and mobilization during the Depression decade once led the historian Irving Bernstein to label this period, the "Turbulent Years." I was part of a group of self-described "new labor historians" that set out to penetrate the mysteries of this movement and especially the consciousness of the workers who participated in it. Most of us undertook community or single industry studies, out of the conviction that the kind of in-depth investigations that such focused work allowed would yield fully realized portraits of working-class insurgencies and of the workplaces and communities out of which they emerged. I chose to explore a New England textile city while others opted to work on transit workers in New York City, dockworkers in West Coast port cities, electrical workers in Pittsburgh and Schenectady, teamsters in Minneapolis, and a broad range of industrial workers in Chicago.[1] All of us, however, had one eye on the automobile industry in Detroit and its environs, for this industry had produced what became, arguably, the most successful, innovative, and progressive CIO union, the United Automobile Workers (UAW).

Paralleling a declaration made by 1950s General Motors president Charles Wilson, that the fate of his corporation and of the American nation were inextricably linked, we had come to believe, somewhat more modestly, that the UAW and the progressive labor movement were similarly tied: as the UAW went, in other words, so went the CIO.[2] If a language of Americanism offered U.S. workers of the 1930s and 1940s the materials out of which to fashion a class consciousness, then this language had to be operative among the autoworkers of the UAW. Charles Williams, it seems to me, brings a similar sensibility to his work on the UAW; and one of the contributions of his fine essay is to show how deeply UAW members in Michigan made the rhetoric and symbols of Americanism central to their insurgency.

It is useful to recall that, twenty years ago, most scholars and students of the 1930s dismissed the idea that Americanism could have embodied any kind of class consciousness at all. Few had even thought this to be a subject worthy of study. Those who did had concluded that Americanism was either too shallow a political language to sustain a true insurgency or that, at bottom, it helped to habituate workers to capitalist regimens. Some criticized Americanism for promoting pieties about the Founding Fathers that did little more than to give individuals comfort in a time of economic distress; others argued that it embodied the hegemonic ideology that Antonio Gramsci had identified as "Fordism": the achievement of consensual capitalism through programs of high wages and consumption. Still others thought that the most sustained attempts to join patriotism and class revolt came from the ranks of communists, who were disingenuously using this language to promote their party's interests and power (as in their slogan, "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism"). To the extent to which radical potential resided in the American labor movement in the 1930s, these scholars argued, it was most robust in the early 1930s, before the Communist Party's Popular (and patriotic) Front emerged, before the New Deal had enlisted working-

1. Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City* (2002; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers in New York City, 1933–1966* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Ronald Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2. The premier historian of the UAW is Nelson Lichtenstein. See his *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). See, also, Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975).

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ISSN 0898–588X/05 $9.50

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

class support, and before nationalist imagery had fastened its vise on the labor movement. For them, nationalism was the coffin of working class consciousness.[3]

In our post-communist age, we can now see how much this critique rested on a certain kind of Old Left experience and orthodoxy. The experience in question occurred between the 1880s and 1930s, when conservatives in industrializing Europe and America turned to nationalist ideologies to undercut the support for socialism and then communism among their countries' workers. In the United States in 1919, for example, conservatives sought to make the embrace of Americanism synonymous with the denunciation of Bolshevism. The same forces were at work in Germany, Italy, and a variety of other European countries where the left was strong. The left orthodoxy that emerged from this experience stipulated that socialism and nationalism were sworn enemies, locked in mortal combat. The advance of one weakened the other, and vice versa.[4] It is easy to understand how this belief became an article of faith among radicals who lived through the era of Nazism and Fascism, and saw how those ideologies unleashed murderous nationalisms that destroyed left-wing movements and much more wherever they gained power. It is easy to understand, too, how this deep distrust of nationalism lingered on the Left, carrying itself over from the Old Left to the New, and influencing generations of scholarship on working-class insurgency.

However, this orthodoxy, like most, had its limitations. In this case, it prevented scholars from taking a longer view of the relationship between nationalism and struggles for working-class emancipation. If, in the early twentieth century, radicalism and nationalism had been enemies, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they had been friends. Unconventional communist scholars in Great Britain were among the first to notice this. E.P. Thompson, for example, wrote in his 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class,* about how "the rights of freeborn Englishmen" provided the ideological soil in which working-class consciousness in early nineteenth century England would grow. Eric Hobsbawm overcame his deep personal hatred for twentieth-century European nationalisms to write eloquently about how the greatest struggle of plebeian emancipation, the French Revolution, had joined the class radicalism of the sans-culottes to the desire of the *French* people to be free and self-governing. Everywhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, he noted, democratic revolutions took popular national forms. The peoples who wanted to free themselves from domestic or foreign despots always almost defined themselves by nationality. So, too, did mid-twentieth-century counterparts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who framed their struggles in terms of "national liberation." Struggles for working-class emancipation, Hobsbawm conceded, were part of this larger struggle for national-democratic rights.[5]

In the United States, a similar argument emerged regarding the first hundred years of industrialization, from the 1780s to the 1880s. Eric Foner, Sean Wilentz, Leon Fink, and others demonstrated how a labor variant of republican ideology fueled critiques of capitalist social relations and animated working-class resistance. Workers in the 1930s who used Americanist language to invigorate working-class protest belonged to this longer national-democratic tradition spanning centuries and continents. And, as scholars such as Michael Denning, Lary May, Lewis Erenberg, and David Stowe have now shown, "progressive Americanism" in the 1930s extended well beyond the workplace and the labor movement and into the era's culture – into its literature, movies, music, song, drama, and painting. Michael Denning has exhaustively demonstrated how much patriotic imagery suffused a "cultural front" that accompanied the rise of the CIO. The centrality of Americanism to working-class protest and popular culture during the 1930s, in other words, is now a well-established historical phenomenon, the culmination of twenty years of scholarship.[6]

3. Warren Susman, "Socialism and Americanism," "The Culture of the Thirties," and "Culture and Commitment," in Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 75–85; 150–210; Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., *Selections from the Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 277–318; Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919–1957* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957); James Green, "Working-Class Militancy in the Great Depression," *Radical America* 6 (Nov.–Dec., 1972), 1–36; Staughton Lynd, "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930s: The Case of Steel," in *Radical America* 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1972), 36–64. See, also, Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984). For a similar argument regarding race, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

4. As early as the 1920s, Communists in the Soviet Union began to theorize that the nationalisms of some oppressed peoples – those living under a colonial yoke or, those, such as blacks in the United States, subjected to particularly harsh exploitation – could mobilize revolutionary sentiments. But this perspective rarely produced a more general reevaluation of nationalism's political potential.

5. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963); E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

6. Gary Gerstle, "Preface to the Princeton Edition," *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xi–xxiv; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976); Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A key question that this literature has not yet resolved, however, is that of race. How did working-class Americanism in the 1930s address the racial divide in American society? Did it use the ideals of the Declaration of Independence to forward the goal of racial equality, by bringing black and white workers together as equals in unions, by attacking white supremacy in the South, and by opening opportunities for black artists and performers in elite and popular culture? Or did it nourish a discourse on the superiority of white people, using Americanism as a codeword for whiteness, Europeanness, or racial purity, as it had often been used in the past, and thus, either explicitly or invidiously, reinforcing attitudes about black marginality and inferiority? Three distinct interpretations have emerged to address this issue. The first, most eloquently put forward by Denning and May, celebrates the cultural front for its egalitarianism and pluralism: those associated with the CIO, they argue, made racial equality a prime feature of their cultural politics, and imagined the original "rainbow coalition": an America in which a variety of ethnic and racial groups united to advance a working-class social agenda and simultaneously gain the freedom from WASP tyranny to nourish their particular ethnocultures – Jewish, Catholic, black, and regional. The brake on the cultural front's egalitarian energies came not from anything internal to it, but from external conservative forces that worked hard to shore up embattled class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies.

The second interpretation emerges in Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color.* Although Jacobson does not directly focus on labor questions, he illuminates them through his study of culture and politics. For Jacobson, racial exclusion was constitutive of republicanism from its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century inception through the first half of the twentieth century. The architects of republicanism, Jacobson argues, worried that significant numbers of Americans could not handle the responsibilities that citizenship and popular sovereignty placed on them. Citizens had to be independent (economically and intellectually), virtuous, and capable of restraining their passions. If individuals, or whole groups, could be shown to be chronically deficient in their independence and virtue and too indulgent of their passions, then the nation's sovereign institutions, speaking for the "people," could legitimately exclude them from the rights of citizenship. Nineteenth-century legislatures imposed these exclusions on a variety of groups, including women, Indians, Catholics, and Asians. But the deepest and longest lasting exclusion arose in connection to African Americans, whose enslavement was thought by many whites to have disfigured permanently their suitability for citizenship. Thus, republicanism, in Jacobson's view, came to be inextricably linked with one race – the white race – and this link survived even the greatest social upheavals in American history: Emancipation, Reconstruction, Populism, and the rise of the CIO. Although the forms of white supremacy periodically reconfigured themselves in response to demographic changes and movements for political reform, the essential relationship between whiteness and republicanism and, later, between whiteness and liberalism, endured. Thus, when Jacobson examines literature and film in the 1930s and 1940s, he finds the moves toward racial egalitarianism to be mere feints, and judges the subtle reinscribing of racism into the artifacts of progressive culture to be the far more important development.[7]

The third interpretation, one I associate with my book, *American Crucible,* and with Rogers Smith's work, *Civic Ideals,* occupies a middle ground between the first two. It breaks American nationalism into multiple traditions, in my case two: one civic and one racial. It locates an emancipatory impulse in the former, and argues that, in the 1930s, workers were able to use it to advance their social democratic agendas. In addition, it locates in the second tradition an aspiration to define America by blood, skin color, and an inherited fitness for self-government. This racial nationalism, I argue, also resided in 1930s politics and culture, not just among those who opposed the labor movement but also within the ranks of unionists, New Dealers, and radicals themselves. *American Crucible* shows how such contradictory ideologies coexisted in the same movements and often in the minds of the same individuals, and thus it portrays working-class

Working Class, 1788–1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); and Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976. On the 1930s, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Thomas Gobel, "Becoming American: Ethnic Workers and the Rise of the CIO," *Labor History* 29 (Spring 1998), 173–98. See, also, Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Industrial Relations, 1912–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880–1930," *Journal of American History* 79 (Dec. 1992), 996–1020.

7. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998). See, also, David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

organizations of the 1930s (and their allies) both advancing and stymieing the cause of racial equality.[8]

Broadly speaking, the interpretive ground that Williams has chosen to occupy resembles my own more than that of Denning and Jacobson. His distance from Denning is great: Williams simply does not find in his careful examination of UAW rhetoric the deep and unopposed commitment to racial egalitarianism and cultural pluralism that Denning finds in his cultural front. Williams may be somewhat more proximate in his beliefs to Jacobson than he is to Denning, but he does not seem eager to embrace the latter's insistence that republicanism and liberalism are inextricably bound up with the maintenance of racial hierarchy. He not only accepts my argument that American nationalism comprises separate traditions, one civic and the other racial, but also finds multiple instances where the civic tradition operated in the insurgent, egalitarian manner that I describe in *American Crucible*. Williams, in other words, seems to have migrated to the complicated middle ground in which I have chosen to reside, and I welcome him to this new land. It can often be a messy place to work and live, for it forces one to deal with chronic inconsistency and contradiction in the ideologies Americans have used to describe national, cultural, and political aspirations. It does provide, however, a superior vantage point from which to study the phenomena that concern us both.

That is not to say we agree on everything. Williams criticizes me for underestimating or ignoring the way in which the language of civic nationalism itself could be used to maintain racial hierarchies among working-class Detroiters and unionists in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, he emphasizes how the supposedly race-neutral terms of civic nationalism permitted white working-class segregationists in Detroit to push for the exclusion of blacks from the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in 1942 and allowed white UAW leaders to limit the influence of black unionists in the postwar UAW. Williams's analysis of the Sojourner Truth battle is the weaker of his two cases: while there were some instances in which white segregationists turned to civic nationalism to make their case for limiting the number of blacks who could move into the housing project, their investment in racial nationalism, by Williams's own telling, remained large. Indeed, I would argue that Williams's handling of these 1940s Detroit segregationists closely resembles my own treatment, in *American Crucible,* of Martin Dies and other 1930s southern conservatives who loathed the New Deal. Dies, I show, attempted to construct his conservatism out of the "race-neutral terms of civic nationalism itself" but was "so deeply steeped . . . in racialized notions of American nationhood that he could not break free of their influence."[9] This seems as fitting description of Williams's Sojourner Truth segregationists as of the Texas congressman himself.

Williams's stronger case analyzes the way in which the UAW's Reutherite leadership used civic nationalist terms to undermine African-American efforts to gain a black seat on the union's International Executive Board (IEB) in the 1940s and 1950s. This effort was part of a larger campaign by black workers to compel the UAW to recognize the way in which race had shaped (and deformed) black-white relations in automobile plants, union affairs, and Detroit politics. The Reutherite leadership, however, adamantly refused to approve the black demand for representation, couching its opposition in race-neutral, civic nationalist, language: the union way, like the American way, the Reutherites insisted, was to treat all groups the same, which meant special privileges for none. Indeed, creating a black seat on the IEB board, they argued, would, on the one hand, simply duplicate the dreaded practices of Jim Crow (by singling out blacks for special treatment) and, on the other, lead to balkanization of the union, as each union group – Catholics, Jews, Poles, and so on – would demand its own seat at the table.

The particulars of this struggle need not detain us here: what matters is Williams's larger claim about how liberals and progressives – even those such as Walter Reuther who built a national reputation as an advocate for civil rights – used a civic language of equality and fairness to mask (and thus to reproduce) structural inequalities in the distribution of power and opportunities between blacks and whites. This is not a new argument, as Williams's references to Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's work on racial formations makes clear.[10] However, Williams's iteration of it is fresh and powerful, and one of the first to critique civic nationalism (as opposed to liberalism) in this way.

I have long been attracted to arguments that distinguish between the formal principles of ideologies ("equality," "fairness") and the actual way in which they shape social practice. Indeed, anyone who has studied U.S. labor history has had to reckon with the ways in which legal liberalism has periodically endorsed an economic and political "reality" that everyone knew to be fictive: namely, that a powerful corporation is an individual whose rights and interests are fundamentally indistinguishable from those of a individual wage-earner. In such ways did the American legal system rationalize the substantive inequality generated by capitalism as a legitimate expression of the formal equality called for by American law.

8. Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).

9. Gerstle, *American Crucible,* 160.

10. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X05000052 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One of the achievements of working-class activists in the 1930s – and one that I document in *Working Class Americanism* – was to expose this "formal equality" as a myth and to demand that workplaces be reorganized on principles that were genuinely democratic. For close to a decade, these activists and their unions enjoyed impressive success, until the combined force of war-induced demands for conformity and an employer counteroffensive restored capitalist prerogatives in law and in the workplace. At that point, the openness of Americanism to anticapitalist sentiments declined, an argument I reiterate in *American Crucible,* when I show how the Cold War constrained civic nationalism's capaciousness, making it less useful to those who wanted to fashion from it a radical discourse.[11]

Given my inclination to take seriously arguments about the discrepancy between an ideology's "formal" and "real" properties, I can accept Williams's claim that civic nationalism can generate similar fictions about freedom and equality in regard to race relations; indeed, *American Crucible,* as Williams notes, lays the groundwork for such a position. Certainly, the way in which conservatives today are attempting to roll back civil rights advances, by couching their opposition in race-neutral civic nationalist terms, provides yet another example of this phenomenon. However, Williams's and my area of agreement or disagreement will be larger or smaller depending on the position that Williams takes in regard to a key question: does he believe that civic nationalism *necessarily* reproduces racial inequality? Or, to put it another way, did the postwar UAW leadership's stifling of black union voices result inevitably from its embrace of Americanism? Based on the overall thrust of his article, I think Williams would answer both questions in the negative. Yet, the final section of his paper, a section in which Omi and Winant loom increasingly large, and Black Power's wholesale rejection of Americanism comes into view, gives me pause. In these last few pages, Williams increasingly equates civic nationalism with a New Deal liberalism that had not changed since the 1930s and that had consistently refused to confront America's racial inequalities. In portraying civic nationalism in such terms, Williams seems to move closer to the Jacobson perspective, treating the preservation and reproduction of racism as an essential part of the work that civic nationalism/liberalism does.

I would urge Williams to resist the temptation to embrace this kind of essentialism. If civic nationalism sometimes could be used to support racist ideologies, it also proved indispensable to the egalitarian struggles of those seeking to eliminate racism from American life. The struggle for racial equality has never been easy. The egalitarian legacy of the Revolution could be turned against the goal of black freedom, as Williams and others have demonstrated. And, beyond that, a robust and ugly tradition of racial nationalism, whose twentieth-century work *American Crucible* documents, could be mobilized to put blacks and other racially suspect groups in their place. However, to treat America's national-democratic inheritance simply as a mechanism of racial subordination is to make it impossible to comprehend the history of freedom struggles in the United States and, more specifically, the efforts by African Americans to make themselves free and equal citizens of the American republic. We should resist the temptation, in other words, to resurrect a variant of the early twentieth century Left orthodoxy that regarded national-democratic revolutions and ideologies as inimical to subaltern emancipation.

11. During World War II and after, employers and their government allies embraced a version of Americanism, "industrial pluralism," that endowed corporations with the "same" rights that workers had achieved in the 1930s and thereby restored a balance of power that (in their eyes) had tilted dangerously in an anticapitalist direction. By the 1950s, the industrial pluralists had won their struggle, and their philosophy governed the way in which the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) regulated labor-capital from that time through the 1970s. Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism,* 278–330. See, also, Gerstle, *American Crucible,* 238–280, passim.

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