

# Culture on Relief: The New Deal and the Arts— A Review Essay

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*Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers' Projects in the Midwest*, by Paul Sporn. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995. 373 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

*All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society, 1935-1939*, by Kenneth J. Bindas. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. xiv, 164 pp. Illustrations, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.00 cloth.

*A New Deal for the Arts*, by Bruce I. Bustard. Washington, DC, and Seattle: National Archives and Record Administration in Association with the University of Washington Press, 1997. vii, 133 pp. Illustrations, index. \$24.95 paper.

THE STUDIES of various aspects of the New Deal arts projects by Paul Sporn, Kenneth J. Bindas, and Bruce I. Bustard mark a new stage in the historiography of this subject. All three authors place the cultural goals and works of these programs at center stage.<sup>1</sup> To many readers unfamiliar with work in this area, this might seem only logical, not pathbreaking. Earlier work, however, focused primarily on administrative history, drawing on

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1. Treatment of the New Deal's art programs has always focused more on the work of the projects than have studies of its writers, music, and theater projects. See for example, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art* (Washington, DC, 1991). Over twenty years ago, Jane de Hart Mathews provided a suggestive overview of the New Deal's philosophy about art in a democracy. See her "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy," *Journal of American History* 62 (1975), 316-39.

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the correspondence of arts projects officials. The work produced by the projects was mentioned only in passing—noteworthy events to praise but not analyze.<sup>2</sup> But a critical assessment of the cultural goals and visions that resulted in guidebooks and oral histories, plays, paintings, and music, and the writing of the history of the arts projects need not be treated as separate tasks. The work itself, as the three studies being reviewed here indicate, is an essential part of that history.

The very fact that these books should be celebrated as a sign of, and a contribution to, a new direction in the historiography of the arts projects requires us to assess them not only in terms of their specific questions, theses, and evidence, but also to ask why it has taken so long both in the academic world and in the institutions that present history to the public to develop a discourse probing the relevance of the New Deal experience with public programming in the arts to the challenges of public policy in this area today. The questions Paul Sporn asks about federal cultural policy during the New Deal and today have not been part of either a public discourse about federal arts policy or a scholarly investigation of those topics during the almost sixty years since the demise of the projects. And explorations of the relationship between cultural nationalism and the arts projects have hardly moved beyond the discussion in Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1941).<sup>3</sup>

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2. See William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus, OH, 1969); Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston, 1972); Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana, IL, 1977); Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, NJ, 1973); Jane de Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 1967); Cornelius Baird Canon, "The Federal Music Project of the WPA: Music in a Democracy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1963); Kathleen O'Connor McKinzie, "Writers on Relief, 1935-1942" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1970); Ronald Warren Taber, "The Federal Writers' Project in the Pacific Northwest: A Case Study" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1969); Ronnie W. Clayton, "A History of the Federal Writers' Project in Louisiana" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1974).

3. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature* (New York, 1942). After a period of neglect, a rediscovery and recovery of the work of the New Deal arts projects began in the 1960s. The

A variety of practical, social, and scholarly circumstances long stood in the way of assessing the cultural goals and achievements of these programs. Until fairly recently, unpublished Federal Writers' Project (FWP) interview material was relatively inaccessible. It was kept in what Library of Congress staff called the Buzzard's Nest, a small, unventilated, windowless room at the end of a labyrinth that only a few members of the staff could guide researchers to. Since 1980 library officials have worked to make the material more accessible. They have moved it to the manuscript division and inaugurated the American Memory Project, which will allow anyone with access to a computer work station to construct their own dialogues with the memories captured in the FWP's life history materials.<sup>4</sup> Bruce Bustard's *A New Deal for the Arts*, based on a 1997 National Archives and Records Administration exhibit, constitutes further evidence of the national repositories' change in attitude over the past seventeen years. Along with the American Memory Project, it helps fulfill some of the goals of the Washington staff of the WPA arts projects, who had a vision of a democratic culture in which scholarship was a contributing component, not an end in itself. Part of that vision involved helping bring to a wide public the accounts of diverse groups of individuals who would otherwise have remained private, and to ask that in the academic world and in the popular culture those voices be treated as commentary on the American experience.

Charges of communist infiltration of the arts projects made in the waning years of the New Deal by the Dies Committee became important again during the Cold War and contributed to a decreasing interest in this part of the New Deal legacy, even among artists, literary scholars, folklorists, and histo-

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works of Francis V. O'Connor heralded this renewed interest in the New Deal arts projects. See his *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, CT, 1969); and *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT, 1973). The publication of FWP interviews with former slaves is also a turning point in the historiography of slavery. See George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of a Black Community*, vol. 1, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, CT, 1972), 171.

4. Ann Banks, ed., *First-Person America* (New York, 1990), iv.

rians.<sup>5</sup> During the postwar years of prosperity, a sense of hostility, shame, and indifference toward the depression era extended well beyond the New Deal's opponents. Rejecting the idea that the 1930s were predominantly a "red" decade and questioning the way liberal historians celebrated the New Deal as an apotheosis of an American reform tradition, historians of 1930s culture have been arguing for the past twenty-five years that the period was more conservative than radical. Warren Susman, Richard Pells, and Karal Ann Marling depicted the work of the arts projects as part of a search for reassurance, a bland middle-brow celebration of America that reflected the conservative temperament of the United States in the late 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Paul Sporn's vigorous dissent from this view complements Michael Denning's magisterial reassessment of popular front cultural expression in the thirties.<sup>7</sup>

A final cause of the lack of interest in New Deal arts projects in the postwar United States relates to the concerns of cultural critics. The arts establishment in the Cold War era stressed formalist experimentalism focused on European models and addressed to a small audience of cognoscenti. In their view, thirties cultural nationalism was only a vulgar form of provincial chauvinism hostile to a transnational modernist spirit of experimentalism. Only when depression-era government programs had provided opportunities for individuals who later emerged as leading abstract expressionists did art historians mention such programs

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5. Martin Dies, a Texas Democrat, chaired the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Its hearings in the late thirties are less remembered today than those held later in the 1950s. A wartime alliance with the Soviet Union ended Dies's hold on public attention; however that alliance might be seen as marking only a hiatus in HUAC's history, which begins with the waning of the New Deal, not the beginning of the Cold War.

6. Warren I. Susman, "The Thirties," in Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner, eds., *The Development of an American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1970), 183; Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York, 1973), 315; Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis, 1982).

7. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996). See also Douglas C. Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana, IL, 1994).

in their canon-making histories of American painting. In a post-modernist era, these narrative histories of art, literature, theater, and music are being recognized as exercises in canon formation, rather than as history. Such an approach makes it possible to give renewed attention to the arts in the thirties.<sup>8</sup>

Recent scholarship is making it clear that the modernist impulse in the arts is broader than the canon the arts establishment created in the postwar years. That canon does not include the wide array of writers whose work focused on the modernist themes of incessant change, alienation, anomie, the breakdown of community, homelessness in a heterogeneous world, and the need for new symbols and myths. As Douglas Wixson argues, writers concerned with oral forms, folk symbols, motifs, and myths, as they developed within modern industrial society, engaged in modernist experimental writing. These writers located creativity in the relationship between the individual and the group. Their literary experiments were more accessible than those of modernist writers who located creativity in the individual—artists alone as the high priests of sensibility, artists on a personal quest for unifying myths found in past cultures far removed from their own, or in their individual psyches. The modernist dimension in the work of the arts projects was ignored by the postwar arts establishment.<sup>9</sup>

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8. For a sense of how the literary establishment developed in the post-World War II era, see Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville, TN, 1988); Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circles* (Madison, WI, 1986); and idem, *Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s* (New York, 1995). On the art establishment, see, for example, Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, 1983). See also the discussion of the writing about depression-era art and post-World II American art history in Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge, 1995), 1–8, 160–63. For a stimulating analysis of the tension between canon formation and literary history and how the two are often conflated, with particular attention to the 1950s, see Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison, WI, 1989), 14–17, 36–41, 263–64. Nelson's comments could be applied to the history of the other arts as well.

9. Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America*, 176, 179, 182, 338, 436; Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

OVERCOMING THESE OBSTACLES, the three histories of the arts projects under review have also shifted the focus away from administrative details to deal instead with how project officials tried to contribute to American culture as well as to provide relief. The great strength of *Against Itself* in particular lies in Paul Sporn's framing of the history of the Federal Writers' and Theater Projects (FWP and FTP) in terms of questions that illuminate the cultural history of the New Deal arts projects. This stands in sharp contrast to the limited scope of previous state and regional studies of the FWP, which tended to focus on the dates of memoranda. Sporn's study of the FWP and FTP in Michigan and the Midwest (his treatment of the Midwest does not extend across the Mississippi) focuses on four major topics: the importance of the industrial Midwest in American culture; the effort of New Deal arts projects officials to forge a relationship with "disesteemed" groups, who would be both inspiration and audience for a new art; the arts and patronage in modern civil society; and a comparison of the administration of New Deal arts projects with that of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Sporn points out that studies of the arts projects have given less attention to the industrial Midwest than to either the cosmopolitan Northeast or the rural South, despite "the central role of Detroit and Michigan in twentieth-century Americanism and the typicality of its work force," which means that "what happened there to the FTP and FWP in their quest for an ethnically diverse audience of common people illuminates a very wide horizon of American culture" (26). For Sporn, the key question is, did the FTP and FWP build a relationship to Michigan's ethnically diverse population that enabled them to produce an art that would speak to that audience? He concludes that while government programs fostered the growth of a new audience, political considerations and the relief aspect of the projects severely limited their achievements.

Sporn offers insightful remarks about the complexity of this new ethnically diverse audience; its various members shared life and work experiences that cut across boundaries that separated them at the same time that they held onto exclusionary traditions reinforcing "both sameness and difference." He also notes that while many local project workers came from these

communities, the educational and literary ambitions that gave them the opportunity to do more than routine tasks on the projects had also helped to make them cosmopolitan and somewhat distant from those communities. Sporn's accounts of the literary and theatrical culture of Poles, Finns, Jews, and African Americans in Michigan are informative essays in themselves.

Sporn's analysis of FWP folklore work is by turns one of the most arresting and most exasperating aspects of his study. He adds to the literature recovering the contribution of B. A. Botkin, national FWP folklore editor, to a thirties discourse about regionalism, calling attention to Botkin's arguments for a proletarian regionalism that rejected the antiurban regionalism of the Agrarians and instead sought to concentrate on the cultures of ignored and deprived groups in diverse regions. Here, however, he fails to recognize that Botkin's thinking about proletarian regionalism was inextricably intertwined with his thinking about folklore and modernism, and that his thinking about how to define folk and lore challenged older approaches. Sporn seems not to understand that Botkin and other national FWP officials saw themselves not as opponents of cosmopolitanism and modernism, but as offering a familiarity with diverse American traditions as a form of cosmopolitanism, and as proponents of a new approach to folklore that paid attention to the folk of the present as well as to lore of the past, to urban-industrial lore as well as to rural-agrarian materials.<sup>10</sup>

The most serious theoretical and historical flaws in Sporn's treatment of folklore occur in his attempts to assess the material that the Michigan FWP collected. His assumption that the fact that Federal Writers were not "accredited folklorists" (237) was a serious problem ignores that in the thirties very few "accredited folklorists" could conceive of folklore as including contemporary urban-industrial traditions.<sup>11</sup> It is not at all clear how Sporn de-

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10. B. A. Botkin, "The Folk and the Individual," *The English Journal* 27 (1938), 121-35; idem, "The Folkness of the Folk," *ibid.* 26 (1937), 465-66; idem, "Un-literary Literature," *Trend* 2 (1935), 233-35.

11. I once asked historian/folklorist Charles Joyner if he found that for his research the FWP folklore and ex-slave narratives collected by Genevieve Chandler in coastal South Carolina were flawed by her lack of academic training in folklore. His quick response was that if she had had the type of

finer folklore, or that he understands that under Botkin's direction the FWP was taking an innovative approach. He objects to commonplace riddles collected by the Michigan FWP, arguing that they do not represent folklore because "they are corny, anti-intellectual, and sexist commonplaces that circulated then and now, in the same old garb and shallow wit, across many social, class, and ethnic lines; they do not resonate with the characteristics of a specific tradition—not in metaphor, not in song, and not in wit" (243). It would be hard to find a contemporary folklorist who would reject a riddle in oral circulation based on such objections. It is even more significant that it was just such views that Botkin encouraged Federal Writers to disregard. Botkin was equally interested in the lore of specific groups and in the lore that emerged out of the contacts among heterogeneous groups in a pluralistic society, which, for him, was evidence that folklore was not dying out.<sup>12</sup> It is disturbing that Sporn is apparently unaware that his views are diametrically opposed to national FWP officials' vision of lore in a modern pluralistic society. Sporn need not agree with Botkin, but he needs to be aware that he is writing a critique of the FWP's approach to folklore and not a history of both the FWP's ideas about folklore studies and the material collected.<sup>13</sup>

Sporn's discussion of the Michigan FTP and FWP's ability to create a reciprocal relationship between ethnic minorities and artists is intertwined with his comparison between the New Deal's arts projects and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He largely judges the New Deal arts projects a heroic failure. In their heroic failure, he finds a saving grace.

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academic instruction offered at that time she would not have collected the material she recorded. One problem here is that historians have ignored the history of folklore studies in the United States, when such studies could help us understand how American intellectuals have struggled with ideas and feelings about tradition and modernity, romantic nationalism, and cultural pluralism, and the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society.

12. For an overview of Botkin's career and ideas, see Jerrold Hirsch, "Folklore in the Making: B. A. Botkin," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987), 1-38.

13. For an overview of the work of New Deal folklorists, see Jerrold Hirsch, "Cultural Pluralism and Applied Folklore: The New Deal Precedent," in Burt Feintuch, ed. *The Conservation of Culture: Folklorists and the Public Sector* (Lexington, KY, 1988), 46-67.



He argues that the New Deal arts projects formulated a populist aesthetic that tried to serve an audience that continues to be ignored under the patronage system in capitalist societies. According to Sporn, the arts projects, despite the conflicting aims of providing relief and art, challenged this patronage system in a way it had not been challenged before.<sup>14</sup> The NEA, he maintains, largely serves artists and scholars already recognized by existing cultural institutions. These views deserve long and serious thought.

Sporn's argument that the FWP and FTP sought "to make work produced by these units democratically accessible and responsive to the life and culture of unprivileged publics" is a point well taken (203). His assertion that both the FTP and FWP saw these groups as their primary audience may be more true for the Theater than the Writers' Project. FWP officials liked to argue that they were "introducing America to Americans" by publishing materials about diverse groups for a diverse audience to read. In doing so, they sought to reconcile cultural pluralism as a fact and (in their view) as a positive value with an older romantic nationalist tradition that had stressed homogeneity, and to treat pluralism as a positive aspect of modernity. They advocated a cosmopolitanism that encouraged Americans to value their own provincial and ethnic traditions, and to show an interest in the traditions of their fellow citizens.

FWP officials made the very critique of the place of the arts in modern civil society that Sporn makes, but they made it from within a very different discourse about art, modernity, and cosmopolitanism, which they did not totally reject. They arrived at conclusions similar to Sporn's, but out of a tradition influenced by European romantic nationalism, the romantic desire to reintegrate the artist and his society. There were often great

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14. In his postmodern critique of modernist art, Sporn suggests another way that New Deal arts projects challenged capitalist assumptions. Modernist art, he argues, represents the culmination of trends that began in the Renaissance when an expanding capitalist society and its globally oriented cities produced an individualistic, increasingly private, and cosmopolitan art that was a logical counterpart of bourgeois capitalism. New Deal patronage, he suggests, provides an alternative to the "self-reflexivity and cosmopolitanism" that characterizes modernist art.

discrepancies between the ideas of national officials and the workings of state FWP offices. Still, a history of the FWP at the state and regional levels needs to pay more attention than Sporn does to the visions of the national office as an important component of the story.

IN CONTRAST to the other New Deal arts projects, the Federal Music Project (FMP) offered the least challenge to traditional ideas about the role of art and art patronage in modern society. The FMP, as Kenneth J. Bindas points out in *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society, 1935-1939*, was the most conservative of the New Deal arts projects. In his modest but ably done study, Bindas paints a picture of an organization that largely operated in the manner of earlier genteel romantic nationalist organizations that were content to create institutions—such as symphonies and museums—whose primary function was to introduce Americans to the best of European culture. Unlike its more genteel predecessors, the FMP was not content only to possess and preserve European high culture. It often featured American composers in its symphonic programs. If nothing else, it seemed good nationalistic politics. Nikolai Sokoloff, national FMP director, did seek to create an American audience for cultivated music. But in his view, this meant elevating American tastes to the point where cultivated music would replace the vernacular tradition.

Sokoloff had little interest in the diverse musical traditions of cultural minorities. He was not looking for vernacular traditions on which to build an American symphonic music. He saw no need to try to reconcile romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism, nor did he have any interest in American folk or popular music. The latter attitude earned him the enmity of unemployed popular musicians, who far outnumbered performers of classical music. He did look to reach new audiences by having the FMP perform in places such as Des Moines, Iowa, that rarely, if ever, heard a symphony. The FMP was eager to reach a wide audience, but it was rarely interested in the musical traditions of that audience.

Bindas does miss an opportunity to make a connection between the FMP and other New Deal arts projects. The work of Charles Seeger through the FMP and the Resettlement Administration is the Music Project's major link to the other arts projects. Botkin served as chairman and Seeger as vice-chairman on the WPA Joint Folklore Committee. Given Bindas's focus, Seeger receives relatively little attention. It is the work of the Joint Committee that allowed for musical activity that paralleled the interest of the other arts projects in vernacular traditions. Experts on folklore, folk music, and the folk arts exchanged information regarding collecting, preserving, and using these materials. An equal emphasis on use meant that representatives from the WPA recreation and education divisions were involved on the Joint Folklore Committee as well as those from the Writers', Music, Theater, and Art Projects. Like John Dewey, they thought of art as a social activity, an experience that should be made available to all citizens in a democracy.

FEW BOOKS may be able to do more to arouse the interest of the general reader than Bruce I. Bustard's *A New Deal for the Arts*. This exhibit catalog is a visual feast. Although its reproductions obviously have to favor the work of visual artists on the Federal Art Project, the Public Works of Art Program, the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, and the Farm Security Administration photographers, there are examples of FWP book covers, FMP posters, and FTP programs. The text is clearly written and well organized around the major themes of rediscovering America, celebrating the people, support for the New Deal, political activism among artists, and the study of the vernacular arts. Although it breaks no significant new ground, it is informed by current scholarship. The basic themes of cultural nationalism, the reintegration of the artist and society, and art for the masses are all there. If it offers some of this art at face value, it also does not mystify lay readers with discussions about the reinscribing of FSA photographs in new meaning-generating discourses, or of the allegedly hegemonizing language of the Federal Art Project and "the ideal of New Deal citizenship," even though those

might well be worth pursuing in less esoteric language.<sup>15</sup> *A New Deal for the Arts* is a good starting point for anyone looking for an introduction to the topic. Besides, it is a visual treasure trove even for the specialist.

THE TASK of examining the New Deal arts projects in the context of the broad currents of American intellectual and cultural history and of making the work of those projects available to later generations should keep a growing number of scholars, archivists, and museums busy for the foreseeable future. Undertaking this work will enable us to experience New Deal art more deeply, to appreciate the thinking of New Deal cultural officials, and to clarify our own thinking about the relationship between government and culture, ultimately between culture and democracy.

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15. For a review of the literature on the Farm Security Administration photographs, written from the perspective of a fierce critic of current trends, see Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville, TN, 1992), 4-13. On the hegemonizing language, see Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 8.

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