

Excerpts from the Introduction to my dissertation, “[Down But Not Out: The Unemployed in Chicago during the Great Depression](#)”

By Chris Wright

I'm convinced that the large majority of humanistic scholarship is done in the wrong way, with a superficial method. Insofar as scholarship prioritizes *ideas*—or discourses, ideologies, “cultures,” “texts,” identities, etc.—at the expense of material conditions and *class*, it is taking exactly the wrong approach. As Marx argued, the latter must take precedence over the former, not vice versa, as is decreed by [postmodernism](#). I present arguments for the Marxian approach below, especially from page 6 onwards.

*

...Historians have not really plumbed the depths of people's opposition to the dominant society. A virtual library of historiography has been written on the subject of explicit political and economic resistance, especially in the form of labor unions and social movements, but more can still be said about subtler types of resistance and nonconformism. In particular, the anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian dimensions of people's behavior and thoughts can be further explored. If capitalism means private ownership of the means of production, private control (by the owners or their representatives) over the workplace, production for the single purpose of accumulating profits that are privately appropriated by the owners, and such tendencies as ever-increasing privatization of society (an outgrowth of capital owners' extension of their control and ownership to ever more social domains), the mediation of more and more human interactions through market processes, and commodification of increasingly many things, including human labor-power, nature, ideas, and public goods like education and health care—all of which tendencies have become increasingly pronounced in recent centuries, except when held in check by popular movements or other countervailing forces¹—then it can be shown that the vast majority of people have, in various ways and often even unknowingly, opposed it. Much of labor history, of course, has this implication, though it is not always made clear. Thus, I think historians should do more to show

¹ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

the extent to which people are ambivalent, even hostile, towards dominant institutions, practices, ideologies, and values. This anti-Gramscian emphasis is one of the guiding themes of my study.

On the most basic level, for instance, everyone acts in a rather “communistic” way, as the anthropologist David Graeber points out.² Even corporate executives, not to mention people less integrated into market structures, ordinarily act according to what Graeber calls “baseline communism.” For, if communism means “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (as Marx defined it), then it simply means sharing, helping, and cooperating—giving to others in need what you’re able to give them, even if it is only advice, assistance at some task, sympathy or emotional support, or some money to tide them over. Friends, coworkers, relatives, lovers, even total strangers constantly act in this way. In this sense, in fact, “*communism is the foundation of all human sociability*”; it can be considered “the raw material of sociality, a recognition of our ultimate interdependence that is the ultimate substance of social peace,” as Graeber says. Society is held together by this dense anti-capitalist fabric, into which the more superficial patterns of commercialism, the profit motive, and greed are woven. One might even reverse the typical judgment of apologists for capitalism: not only is capitalism not a straightforward expression of human nature (supposedly because we’re all naturally greedy, as a Milton Friedman or a Friedrich Hayek might say); it is more like a perversion of human nature, which is evidently drawn to such things as compassion, love, community, respect for others, and free self-expression unimpeded by authoritarian rules in the economic or political sphere. Capitalism is parasitic on “everyday communism,” which is but a manifestation of human needs and desires. In short, insofar as there is a “hegemony” of capitalist culture and ideology at all, simple reflections such as these—even apart from historical analysis—already show that it must be quite superficial compared to the underlying substratum of human sociality, which expresses itself in frequently anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian ways in every moment of the day.

Everyday communism, however, has historically been especially pronounced among the lower classes—the peasantry, industrial workers, struggling immigrants, the petty-bourgeoisie—who have relied on it for survival in hard times and even in normal times, and who, moreover, have not been as deeply integrated into commercial structures and ideologies as the elite has. Social

² David Graeber, “On the Moral Grounds of Economic Relations: A Maussian Approach,” *Open Anthropology Cooperative Press*, Working Papers Series #6 (2010), at www.openanthcoop.net/press. See also Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011).

history has done much to illuminate the “communism” (without calling it that) of the American working class during its many formative decades, through description of the thick networks of voluntary associations that workers, especially immigrants, created among themselves, and of the “mutualist” ethic to which they subscribed in the context of their battles with employers, and of the vitally *public* character of their shared culture up to at least the 1940s.³ All this was very much anti-capitalist and anti- the dominant ideologies of the day, whether individualism, the “open shop” idea, Social Darwinism, or imperialistic nationalism. The long-term unemployed have tended to be ignored in this historiography, so in the third chapter I try to show in what respects they, too, acted in communistic ways. For unemployment did not produce only atomization, as is commonly supposed; it also gave rise to the opposite, community. And that is what is most interesting to study.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony—which James C. Scott defines as the idea that “class rule is effected not so much by sanctions and coercion as by the consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes”⁴—has been criticized repeatedly and should, I think—if watered down from this strong formulation—be relegated to the status of little more than an important qualification to the truths of a “vulgar Marxism” that assigns overwhelming explanatory power to brute economic and political coercion, and to *interest*—primarily class-determined—rather than *values* or *consciousness* (which tend to reflect economic position). Before defending this statement, however, and elaborating on its relation to the book, I want to make a suggestion that pertains to “bottom-up” social history as a whole, to its very *raison d'être*. To my knowledge, the radical political scientist Thomas Ferguson's challenge, in 1995, to social historians has never met with a response:

³ See, among innumerable others, Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Susan Porter Benson, *Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁴ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 315, 316. On hegemony, see the thoughtful discussions in Leon Fink, *In Search of the Working Class: Essays in American Labor History and Political Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 89–143.

Perhaps in reaction to the last generation of “consensus historians,” many recent studies of American history make a determined effort to discuss the often very painful daily-life experiences of ordinary people. This research has produced many significant works that amount to a powerful indictment of conventional pluralist theories of American politics. But while I am totally in sympathy with efforts to “assert the dignity of work,” “reveal the thoughts and actions of the rank and file,” or show ordinary people as “active, articulate participants in a historical process,” and similar aims, I am very skeptical about this literature’s frequent unwillingness and inability to come finally to a point. That ordinary people are historical subjects is a vital truth; that they are the primary shapers of the American past seems to me either a triviality or a highly dubious theory about the control of both political and economic investment in American history.⁵

In other words, why do we do social history in the first place? What are the general truths we are trying to establish? Admittedly, there need not be such truths at all. The project of unearthing the lives and thoughts of people whom history has tried to bury in oblivion—the “voiceless toilers” from time immemorial, upon whom have been built great civilizations that “despised them and [have done] all [they] could to forget them,” to quote G. E. M. de Ste. Croix⁶—is an intrinsically noble endeavor, a kind of moral crusade to be waged for its own sake. It would be nice, though, if there were also certain truths we were trying to illustrate in our reconstructions and analyses.

It seems to me that there is one such truth above all, which is implicit in much historiography but ought to be made explicit: the Gramscian idea of hegemony, as defined a moment ago, is wrong. Any emphasis on consent, consensus, culture, ideology, shared values, “discourses,” or some such concept as being what secures the obedience of the lower classes and so explains the perpetuation of a given society is at best highly misleading. If labor history, blood-sodden, conflict-saturated, shows anything at all, it shows that. This, I think, is the best answer to Ferguson’s question about the overarching purpose or implication(s) of this type of social history.

⁵ Thomas Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 96.

⁶ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 210.

The point is not that ordinary people are the primary shapers of the past, for, as Ferguson says, this is either a truism or completely wrong (since surely the economic and political elite, which possesses incomparably the most resources, has more direct power than “ordinary people” over the paths that history takes). But the anti-Gramscian point is both substantive and true, as I’ll argue presently. It has the merit, moreover—if explicitly emphasized by historians—of elevating bottom-up social history to an even higher moral level, for it implies that people are not mere receptacles for propaganda, slavish beings with easily inscribable *tabula rasas* for minds, but rather have to be *coerced* into a subordinate status because of their essentially independent and freedom-loving nature. Thus, to the degree that historians reject the tendency of thought known as Gramscianism and embrace a more traditional Marxian view that highlights struggle, the use of force, violence, the conflict between rich and poor, and the soft compulsion of institutional structures, they can pride themselves on their knowledge of serving both morality—or, better, “humanism,” a belief in the inherent dignity of all people—and truth. If, that is, they accept the following arguments.

First, I must point out that even though it is not necessarily common in recent historiography to bandy about such notions as cultural hegemony or consent or the masses’ ideological submission to their masters—and so this whole fuss I’m making about the Gramscian tendency of thought might seem pointless or dated—in fact the methods of some postmodern scholarship tend to imply an idealism much more extreme than that of Gramsci (who was, after all, a Marxist). While this is not the place for a sustained critique of postmodernism,⁷ it is relevant to observe that the postmodern fixation on discourses, language, “vocabularies,” culture, “society’s imaginary,” and subjective identities, as opposed to objective class structures, institutional relations, class struggle, control over the means of producing wealth and of physical coercion, has implications that are more Gramscian than Gramscianism itself. For, to the extent that one emphasizes phenomena of ideology and consciousness as explicating the nature of social dynamics, one implies that people’s subordination to the powerful is a product either of (1) their conscious choice, (2) their being too incompetent to rise through their own individual efforts into the ranks of the elite, or (3) their being brainwashed by culture and dominant ideologies. To the degree that one denies the primacy of economic structures in determining social relations,

⁷ See my *Notes of an Underground Humanist* (Bradenton, FL: Booklocker, 2013), chapters one and two; Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997).

preferring the idealistic mode of explanation, one is forced to invoke such unattractive options in order to explain inequalities of power. This fact is ironic, since one of the guiding ideals of postmodern historians is their recognition of the agency and dignity of ordinary people (by, for example, relating, without judgment, how people see themselves and interpret their actions).⁸ Being unaware of the logical implications of their idealistic perspective, they are unaware that the interpretation that attributes most rationality and dignity to people is a Marxism that treats idealist considerations as little more than an important afterthought.

Postmodernism is but the most recent manifestation of the idealism that has always afflicted mainstream intellectual culture, even back to the Enlightenment—or rather back to antiquity, when Plato viewed the world as consisting of shadows of ideal Forms, Hindus and Buddhists interpreted it in spiritual terms and as being somehow illusory, and Stoics were telling “the slave in the mines that if he would only think aright he would be happy.”⁹ Such idealism is no surprise, since people (intellectuals) whose institutional function is to produce words and ideas are naturally going to think that words and ideas are of exceptional importance, and that bodily needs and processes of material production are vulgar and uninteresting. Moreover, from a Marxian perspective it makes perfect sense that mainstream intellectuals would propagate ideologies that distract from class struggle and class structure, because the dominant interests in society—viz., wealthy individuals and institutions, which are dominant because they have the most control over the most resources—are not going to support, and indeed will try to suppress, interpretations that draw attention to their wealth and power by showing how it operates, how it has been acquired, and how it is inversely related to the power of ordinary people. In other words, a materialist analysis that foregrounds class conflict and the exploitation of subordinate classes threatens the given distribution of power, so it will incur the wrath of the powerful and will tend to be “filtered out” of intellectual institutions.¹⁰ “Politically neutral” or idealist scholarship,

⁸ See, e.g., Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Needless to say, good “postmodern” scholarship, like Moreton’s, tempers its focus on subjectivity and ideology with attention to economic context and the overwhelming power of big business. I am commenting only on *tendencies* that I see as problematic.

⁹ W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1927), 298.

¹⁰ There are many examples of intellectuals whose careers have been damaged or destroyed because of their radical scholarship. In one egregious case, Thomas Ferguson was denied tenure at MIT explicitly because of his materialist writings. See Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel, eds., *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 243.

unchallenging to the wealthy, will therefore predominate. One recalls that before the reign of postmodernism there was the reign of the liberal consensus school of historians such as Louis Hartz, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Oscar Handlin, and Daniel Boorstin, a school that makes one think of a bourgeois version of Gramscianism in its emphasis on the socially cohering force of a relative consensus of values among all classes.¹¹ Thus, “the fashionable theory of economic nondeterminism” of politics and society about which Gabriel Kolko complained in the 1960s has in fact been fashionable since at least the 1940s, and will probably continue to be so until class-based social movements again reach the level they attained in the 1930s.¹²

In defense of the Marxism that guides this study, a few general statements may be offered. The explanatory primacy of class over other variables can be established on simple *a priori* grounds, quite apart from empirical sociological or historical analysis. One has only to reflect that access to resources—money, capital, technology—is of unique importance to life, being key to survival, to a high quality of life, to political power, to social and cultural influence; and access to (or control over) resources is determined ultimately by class position, one’s position in the social relations of production. The owner of the means of production, i.e. the capitalist, has control over more resources than the person who owns only his labor-power, which means he is better able to influence the political process (for example by bribing politicians) and to propagate ideas and values that legitimate his dominant position and justify the subordination of others. These two broad groups of owners and workers—an analytic classification that, of course, simplifies and abstracts from the complexities of the real world in order to create a model that can facilitate understanding—have opposing interests, most obviously in the inverse relation between wages and profits. This antagonism of interests is the “class struggle,” a struggle that need not always be explicit or conscious but is constantly present on an implicit level, indeed is constitutive of the

¹¹ The radical historian Jesse Lemisch devastatingly criticized this school in his 1969 paper “[Present-Mindedness Revisited: Anti-Radicalism as a Goal of American Historical Writing Since World War II](#),” published in 1975 (as *On Active Service in War and Peace: Politics and Ideology in the American Historical Profession*) by an obscure independent press because it was too left-wing to make it into establishment journals.

¹² The quotation is from Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 81. A recent example of such economic nondeterminism is Odd Arne Westad’s highly regarded book [*The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*](#) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), which argues, implausibly, that “the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the *ideologies* inherent in their politics” (my italics), rather than by economic and strategic considerations of power. Kolko’s and [*Walter LaFeber’s*](#) works are excellent correctives to the liberal idealism of a Westad.

relationship between capitalist and worker. The class struggle—that is, the structure and functioning of economic institutions—can be called the foundation of society, the dynamic around which society tends to revolve, because, again, it is through class that institutions and actors acquire the means to influence social life. Marx was therefore right to contrast—albeit in metaphorical and misleading language—the economic “base” with the political, cultural, and ideological “superstructure.”¹³

It may be of interest to note, incidentally, that Marx was far from the first writer to prioritize class struggle. Aristotle’s *Politics* already has a definitely materialistic bias, treating it as a truism that “class” (to use an anachronism) is of foundational significance to society. More recently, James Madison was, in essence, a proto-“historical materialist,” as is clear from his famous *Federalist No. 10*:

[T]he most common and durable source of factions [he writes] has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes actuated by different sentiments and views.

Charles Beard went so far as to say that *The Federalist* “is in fact the finest study in the economic interpretation of politics which exists in any language; and whoever would understand the

¹³ The base/superstructure controversy has spawned an entire literature, but the previous sentence in the text is really all that’s needed to end the controversy and establish the meaning and validity of the Marxian metaphor. *Of course* the economy is the “base” and everything else the “superstructure.” After all, culture and politics and ideologies are not somehow the product of spontaneous generation; they are brought into being by particular actors and institutions. And in order to bring into being the forms and content of a culture and politics, one needs resources. The production and distribution of resources, in particular material resources, takes place in the economic sphere. So, the way that resources are allocated according to economic structures—who gets the most, who gets the least, etc.—will be the key factor in determining, broadly speaking, the forms and content of a given culture and politics. The interests of the wealthy will tend to be disproportionately represented. —In the entire literature (not all of which I’ve read), I don’t recall ever encountering this simple and decisive, commonsensical argument.

Constitution as an economic document need hardly go beyond it.”¹⁴ The quotation from Madison indicates that, strictly speaking, the idea of class conflict denotes more than just the conflict between worker and capitalist (or master and slave, etc.); it extends to conflicts between economic subdivisions of the dominant class(es). I disregard this extension of the concept, however, since it is of little relevance to my subject.

An enormous amount of scholarship shows the explanatory power of the Marxian framework that uses class, or class struggle, to understand the world.¹⁵ Even ideologies of race, nation, and gender are largely a product of class—of slavery and its aftermath in the U.S., of European imperialism, of attempts by the Victorian upper class to control working-class women’s lives and sexuality.¹⁶ In the case of religious fundamentalism in the U.S., for example, historians have shown that since early in the twentieth century, and especially since the 1970s, conservative sectors of the business community have subsidized right-wing evangelical Christianity in order to beat back unionism and liberalism, which have been tarred and feathered as communist, socialist, godless, etc.¹⁷ More generally, for centuries the ruling class (which is to say the aggregate of those who occupy the dominant positions in a society’s dominant mode of production, and so have shared interests) has propagated divisive ideas of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and gender in order, partly, to fragment the working class and so control it more easily and effectively. It is true, again, that such arguments—that all Marxist or “economistic” arguments—simplify, abstracting from complicating factors; and mainstream scholars typically consider this fact to be a weakness of Marxism, a sign of unsophistication. The pejorative label “reductivism” is flung at any argument that explains a set of phenomena in economic terms, especially in terms of class struggle. Somehow, it is considered an intellectual *vice*, and not a *virtue*, to *simplify* for the sake

¹⁴ Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1921), 153.

¹⁵ Among many others, see the works of [E. P. Thompson](#), [Paul Sweezy](#), [Paul Baran](#), [Ernest Mandel](#), [Raymond Williams](#), [Harry Braverman](#), [G. E. M. de Ste. Croix](#), [David Noble](#), [Gabriel Kolko](#), [Walter LaFeber](#), [Noam Chomsky](#), [David Montgomery](#), [Robert Brenner](#), [Erik Olin Wright](#), [Göran Therborn](#), [Perry Anderson](#), [Thomas Ferguson](#), [David Harvey](#), and [John Bellamy Foster](#).

¹⁶ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999); J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (New York: J. Pott & Co., 1902); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1958); Catriona Parratt, “More Than Mere Amusement”: *Working-Class Women’s Leisure in England, 1750–1914* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Ken and Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

of *understanding*. After all, the world is a complex place, and in order to understand it one has to simplify it a bit, explain it in terms of general principles. As in the natural sciences, a single principle can never explain *everything*; but, if it is the right one, it can explain a great deal.

Since this is an important point for my dissertation, which gives pride of place to class struggle, it deserves a more extensive defense than the preceding three sentences. I will yield here to Noam Chomsky, whose eloquence is unsurpassed. The following is an excerpt from an interview:

Question: But you're often accused of being too black-and-white in your analysis, of dividing the world into evil élites and subjugated or mystified masses. Does your approach ever get in the way of basic accuracy?

Answer: I do approach these questions a bit differently than historical scholarship generally does. But that's because humanistic scholarship tends to be irrational. I approach these questions pretty much as I would approach my scientific work. In that work—in any kind of rational inquiry—what you try to do is identify major factors, understand them, and see what you can explain in terms of them. Then you always find a periphery of unexplained phenomena, and you introduce minor factors and try to account for those phenomena. What you're always searching for is the guiding principles: the major effects, the dominant structures. In order to do that, you set aside a lot of tenth-order effects. Now, that's not the method of humanistic scholarship, which tends in a different direction. Humanistic scholarship—I'm caricaturing a bit for simplicity—says every fact is precious; you put it alongside every other fact. That's a sure way to guarantee you'll never understand anything. If you tried to do that in the sciences, you wouldn't even reach the level of Babylonian astronomy.

I don't think the [social] field of inquiry is fundamentally different in this respect. Take what we were talking about before: institutional facts. Those are major factors. There are also minor factors, like individual differences, microbureaucratic interactions, or what the President's wife told him at breakfast. These are all tenth-order effects. I don't pay much attention to them, because I think they all operate within a fairly narrow range which is predictable by the major

factors. I think you can isolate those major factors. You can document them quite well; you can illustrate them in historical practice; you can verify them. If you read the documentary record critically, you can find them very prominently displayed, and you can find that other things follow from them. There's also a range of nuances and minor effects, and I think these two categories should be very sharply separated.

When you proceed in this fashion, it might give someone who's not used to such an approach the sense of black-and-white, of drawing lines too clearly. It purposely does that. That's what is involved when you try to identify major, dominant effects and put them in their proper place.¹⁸

Karl Kautsky said something similar when he wrote, in *Foundations of Christianity*, “[T]he task of science is not simply a presentation of that which *is*, giving a faithful photograph of reality, so that any normally constituted observer will form the same image. The task of science consists in observing the general, essential element in the mass of impressions and phenomena received, and thus providing a clue by means of which we can find our bearings in the labyrinth of reality.”¹⁹

Likewise, Jean Jaurès wrote in his classic history of the French Revolution, “In every order of questions, in every order of facts we must attempt to draw out the most general idea. We must seek the largest and simplest concept under which we can group the greatest number of orders and objects, and we will thus little by little extend our net over the world... In all times and places, under the infinite and overwhelming diversity of particular facts, science through a daring operation perceives and draws out a few decisive and profound characteristics. And it is this clear and relatively simple idea that it tests and develops through observation, calculations, and by the ceaseless comparisons of the extension of the act and the extensions of the idea.”²⁰ This is the method of the true scientist, both the natural and the social scientist.

The postmodern academic agenda of “problematizing” “narratives”—especially “meta-narratives” like the Marxian approach to history—has had many salutary consequences for our

¹⁸ Adam Jones, “The Radical Vocation: An Interview with Noam Chomsky,” February 20, 1990, at <http://zcomm.org/wp-content/uploads/zbooks/www/chomsky/9002-vocation.html> (accessed February 1, 2016).

¹⁹ Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity: A Study in Christian Origins* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972/1908), 12.

²⁰ Jean Jaurès, *A Socialist History of the French Revolution* (1901–04), at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/jaures/>.

understanding of the world. Simplifications often *are* superficial. But not always: sometimes they are much deeper than the “complications” that scholarship revels in, which distract from essential general insights into how power works, and how class is the basis for the institutional infrastructure that regulates social behavior. Just as it is of little interest to problematize for the sake of problematizing—as is done all too frequently—so the mainstream scholarly aversion to general truths, to generalities as such, is wrong.

The class-focused perspective in fact allows us to understand how the approach to history that heeds only the *particular* and not the *general*—the *exception* at the expense of the *rule*—could have become dominant in the first place. It has to do with how postmodernism itself—i.e., an emphasis on the particular, the fragmented, the single exception, and the subjective, the imagistic, the discursive, the self-interpretations of actors (as if self-interpretations are always correct and not usually deceived)—could have become the reigning paradigm in the humanities. The key, to repeat, is that this approach to writing history does not challenge the dominant interests in society, the main power-structures, the “ruling class” in traditional Marxian language, so it will be allowed and encouraged to proliferate. The explanation of postmodern particularism—“every fact is precious; you put it alongside every other fact”—really is similar to the explanation of its idealism. Again, regarding the idealism: the reason someone like [Foucault](#) could become an inspiration for mainstream scholarship is that his works attend to everything except class: discourse, knowledge, consciousness, the body, the state.²¹ Such anti-Marxism, being politically safe, is always good for having a stable and successful career, especially in a time (post-1970s) when organized labor is on the decline, such that there is no powerful political constituency to subsidize and promote materialist scholarship. Foucault was appropriate to a time when big business was decimating labor, the rise of feminism was turning cultural attention to the body and sexuality, conservative ideological attacks on the overweening power of “big government” made it appropriate for intellectuals to study the history of the state’s attempts to control “discourses,” etc. To many intellectuals, class struggle seemed to have disappeared. Of course, this perception was only a

²¹ To see how explanatorily impoverished, even confused, such a scholarly focus is compared with the focus on class, contrast Foucault’s famous *Discipline and Punish* with [the Marxist classic *Punishment and Social Structure* \(1939\), by Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer](#). While the latter *explains*, the former merely *describes* (badly and obscurely).

symptom of the *intensification*—and *triumph*—of class struggle on the capitalist side and its substantial defeat on the labor side.²²

In a similar way, the historiographical agenda to problematize Marxian common sense by treating class as merely a “social construct,” a subjective identity not different in kind from gender or race or sexuality, as if objective institutional structures do not exist—and so arguing that Marxian explanations are “unsophisticated” because of all the little factors they ignore—is essentially just a way of enforcing mainstream ideologies and thus serving the masters, the corporate sector and wealthy university donors, most of whom certainly do not want general truths about class, wealth, and power to be propagated. Scholars may not be aware of these facts or have such motivations in mind when ignoring class or criticizing its analytic prioritization, but this is the effect that doing so has, and this is the main institutional function of postmodern intellectual agendas.

As a result, I depart from academic orthodoxy in this work, preferring to illustrate general truths about the conflict between (relatively) rich and (relatively) poor that roughly determines social dynamics. I am interested in the particular less for its own sake than for its broader implications. The foregrounding of class at times gives the dissertation a polemical tone, as in some passages on the service that Chicago’s police force regularly rendered the business community, but it is a logical fallacy to think that a slightly polemical tone indicates that a work has abandoned the “disinterested” pursuit of truth in favor of advancing a political agenda. For one thing, “tone” can always be separated from the actual arguments that are made: e.g., in the case of Chomsky’s writings, the morally outraged tone does not entail that the facts he unearths and the arguments he makes are false. Secondly, it simply happens to be the case that certain truths about how the world works are not morally acceptable, so that by describing them, even in neutral language, one cannot avoid giving the impression of partisanship. There is no reason, after all, to

²² On neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (Toronto, Ontario: Seven Stories Press, 1999); Robert Pollin, *Contours of Descent: U.S. Economic Fractures and the Landscape of Global Austerity* (New York: Verso, 2003); Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (New York: Verso, 2006); Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007); Greta Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010); Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *Capital Resurgent: The Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Andrew Glyn, *Capitalism Unleashed: Finance, Globalization, and Welfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

think that the revelation of historical truth must necessarily shine a positive light on the rich and powerful. The contrary would be more likely to be the case. Therefore, it is far from being a counterargument to left-wing writing such as Chomsky's or Howard Zinn's or Gabriel Kolko's that it seems partisan or polemical, for this is what one would expect of a true description of a world in which power is concentrated in the hands of a small elite that, quite rationally, pursues its own interests. Indeed, from this perspective, the *lack* of a partisan tone in most mainstream scholarship suggests (though does not entail) it has not penetrated to essential truths about how society works.²³

In short, I think it is time for historians to, in some respects, problematize the ceaseless problematizing and return to basics. Which means returning to a non-Gramscian Marxism, or at least a Marxism that relegates considerations of culture and hegemony to a decidedly subordinate place. Many arguments can be given in favor of this type of Marxism, and many have been given, especially in a book published in 1980 called *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, by Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan Turner. This book is essential reading for a just evaluation of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, and I cannot hope to reproduce even a fraction of its arguments here. One should also read the last chapter of James C. Scott's classic *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), which builds on the analysis given in the earlier book. In the following I will sketch only a few general arguments, after which I will discuss the 1930s in relation to a paper that presents a perspective different from my own: Melvyn Dubofsky's well-known and provocative "Not so 'Turbulent Years': A New Look at the 1930s," published as a chapter in a book edited by Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher called *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History* (1986). Last, I'll provide a brief summary of each of the following chapters.

The first point to be made is that the foundation of social order is, in fact, violence and the threat of violence. Perry Anderson makes the point by imagining what would happen if the threat vanished. While a kind of consent may ordinarily prevail in our society, it is "constituted by a silent, absent force...: the monopoly of legitimate violence by the State. Deprived of this, the system of cultural control would be instantly fragile, since the limits of possible actions against it would disappear."²⁴ One can imagine how differently people would behave if there were no police

²³ For more thoughts on recent historiography, see my paper "[A Critique of Current Historical Scholarship](#)."

²⁴ Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, I, 100 (November–December 1976): 43.

force or military or security guards or prisons. Surely the poor and even many in the middle class would quickly overrun the property of the rich—neighborhoods, banks, mansions—and take what they could, or distribute it among themselves. This fact already suggests that most people’s ordinary “consent” to the system of rule that exists is basically *prudential* and not ideological, not an indication that they think prevailing hierarchies are legitimate. Later I quote unemployed men in the Depression who had no moral compunctions whatever about stealing, refraining from doing so only because of the possible consequences to their families and themselves.

The threat of state-sanctioned violence is so ubiquitous that we hardly ever notice it or stop to think about it. It hovers over even the hallowed groves of academe, seemingly so peaceful and idyllic. David Graeber muses on the fact that “graduate students [are] able to spend days in the stacks of university libraries poring over Foucault-inspired theoretical tracts about the declining importance of coercion as a factor in modern life without ever reflecting on the fact that, had they insisted on their right to enter the stacks without showing a properly stamped and validated ID, armed men would have been summoned to physically remove them, using whatever force might be required.”²⁵ In any given context, if one doesn’t behave in the proper way then one can expect violent repercussions. Violence is the ultimate arbiter—as generations of workers and activists have learned to their cost, and as the history of capitalism shows all too clearly. In a late capitalist society—hyper-bureaucratized, hyper-regimented, hyper-regulated²⁶—it does not take long for young people to internalize this fact and, as they age, to adjust their behavior accordingly.

However, while the (unconscious) adjustment of behavior to conform with dominant social structures is in part determined by the ever-present threat and reality of violence, it is also determined simply by the “dull compulsion of economic relations,” to quote Marx. And not only economic relations: *all* institutional relations. If one wants to participate in society, one cannot escape them. Speaking of capitalism, Max Weber observed that the economy “is an immense cosmos into which the individual is born, and which presents itself to him...as an unalterable order of things in which he must live. It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the system of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action.”²⁷ To survive, one has to get a job,

²⁵ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 58.

²⁶ See Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*. Also Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1964).

²⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1997 [1930]), 54.

cooperate with bureaucracies, buy the commodities on offer, obey the dictates of certain authorities, in general conform. But this does not imply *endorsement* of the structures and values to which one must conform.

The three preceding paragraphs are sufficient to answer the old, “grand” sociological question of how societies manage to function when they are so riven by conflicts between groups and between individuals. For this purpose, it is not necessary to invoke ideologies or culture or hegemony or “false consciousness” at all. One has only to recognize that (1) the means of violence are overwhelmingly in the hands of the wealthy and those who (directly or indirectly) serve them, whose interest is in maintaining the given distribution of power, and (2) the dominant social structures have a “compulsory” dynamic of their own, even apart from the physical violence that is always on hand to back them up. Even if every member of the subordinate groups perfectly understood how he was exploited and dominated and saw through every mystifying element of the dominant culture, we can see how he would still be inclined to “fit in” in order to survive. Unless his oppression was unbearable, it would make perfect rational sense for him not to risk everything by overtly challenging the institutions that enforced his subordination. To an outside observer it might look as if he were a victim of false consciousness or viewed the system of inequality as legitimate and just—or, alternatively, were discontented but deplorably “passive” or “apathetic” or “apolitical”—when in fact he was merely a rational person with insight into the functioning of power and the probable consequences of flouting its authority.

Of course, most—or all—people in history, including most intellectuals and most members of the ruling class, have not had a scientifically lucid understanding of the world or a perfectly consistent and rational system of values and beliefs (if that is even possible). We are all brought up in a cultural and political environment opaque with myths, deceptions, rationalizations, legitimizing rituals, every technique of obfuscation imaginable. No one is impervious to such influences; we all, surely, have elements of incoherence and false or deluded consciousness in our (mostly unconscious) individual ideological framework. So it is necessary to consider the Gramscian question of consciousness, particularly in relation to subordinate classes.

Before continuing, however, it may be noted that there are senses in which this question is not very interesting. For one thing, people’s reports of their beliefs tend to be quite superficial, which makes it hard to draw conclusions from them about the “consciousness” of the masses. What someone says he believes—and even what he privately *thinks* he believes—is clearly context-

dependent, stimulus-dependent, mood-dependent. In one moment, perhaps after hearing a conservative politician speak, he may think that “big government” is society’s main problem; in another moment, perhaps after hearing a progressive politician speak, he may think that government should regulate the economy much more aggressively, and that the country needs a single-payer national health insurance system. In one moment he may think that the government should nationalize “too-big-to-fail” banks, or even that all businesses should be owned and run by the people who work in them and not by investors or their representatives; in another moment he may think that such ideas are absurd and unrealistic. It is notorious that polling results depend on how questions are phrased.²⁸ In many cases, what people think they believe may be contradicted by their actions and by other statements of theirs. For example, millions of Americans might say that the free market should be the overwhelmingly dominant mode of social regulation even as they complain about the increasing costs of public education, the cost and inadequacy of private health insurance, the limited availability of public transportation, the limited number of public parks in their city, and so forth. In such cases it might be tempting to say they have a “divided consciousness,” but it is evident that what they really would like is a more extensive and better-funded public infrastructure, not a dismantling of public resources in favor of the market. It is only because the “free market” has acquired positive associations in mainstream culture and politics that people might say they support the expansion of its range, not understanding what such support logically entails.

In general, people are far from having acute insight into what they believe and value; and both their “real” (often *implicit*, not explicit) and reported beliefs and values are far from being consistent with each other or over time.²⁹ Human consciousness is not exactly an exemplar of lucidity and (self-)honesty, as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud understood (which is why they were less interested in consciousness as such than in uncovering its hidden grounds and determinants, the *hidden meaning* of conscious states). Self-deception is extraordinarily common, frequently taking the form of merely superficial or nominal adherence to a system of beliefs just because it is a socially accepted thing to believe in. When polls say that 71 percent of Americans in 2014 identified as Christian, what does that mean?³⁰ How does one interpret that finding? How many of

²⁸ Carl Bialik, “When Wording Skews Results in Polls,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 25, 2010.

²⁹ Nicholas Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 141–144.

³⁰ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

these people consciously regulated their lives according to a Christian ideology, and how many used the label “Christian” without its having a perceptible effect on their behavior or values? How many would in fact reject most Christian doctrines, or ideas that have come to be associated with Christianity? One can ask comparable questions about people who consider themselves patriotic, or who say they believe in the “free-enterprise system,” or who identify as conservative (or liberal), etc. These sorts of questions, which challenge the meaningfulness of people’s reports of their values and beliefs, can pose problems for a Gramscian or idealistic type of analysis.

It is not even clear that most people have much in the way of determinate beliefs at all.³¹ And certainly it is doubtful that beliefs, to the extent that they exist, tend in and of themselves to be important regulators of behavior. The world consists, by and large, of pragmatists who do not ordinarily exhibit sustained interest in ideologies or abstract ideas, who may think about such things from time to time but then continue to participate in society in a pragmatic and realistic way, treating it (society) as more or less *given* even if they find many of its features absurd or repellent. We all must, to a large degree, accommodate ourselves to the world and live in it on *its* terms; that is part of what it means to become a mature adult. But such accommodation is a very weak form of “consent” indeed; for it is a consent into which we are *forced*, on pain of ostracism, physical starvation, and legal punishment. In a world of such extreme institutional obstacles to effecting change, it is sensible and natural for people to devote their energy to tasks of survival and recreation (through available, or “hegemonic,” channels like movie-watching, television, and spectator sports) rather than active political dissent or the crafting of considered opinions on issues of moment—even if, to repeat, at bottom they might believe society to be horribly unjust and in need of radical change.

Nevertheless, despite the nebulousness, contradictoriness, and *half-formed* character—and the pragmatic and basically “reactive” character—of an individual’s and a group’s political and cultural consciousness, it can hardly be denied that popular attitudes do, in some sense, exist and have consequences. It is the business class’s understanding of this that explains its intense efforts since the early twentieth century to shape the public mind, to indoctrinate people with conservative ideologies.³² One of the arguments I make in this book, then, is that the long-term unemployed in

³¹ Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, chapters 5 and 6.

³² See, e.g., Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997) and Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

the Depression, contrary to what scholarship has often assumed, were not generally apolitical, that in fact they tended to have a definite left-wing politics. Sometimes this politics was expressed in protest marches, sometimes in “eviction riots,” sometimes in fervent support for Franklin Roosevelt, but most often simply in “the tenacity of self-preservation,” to quote James C. Scott’s characterization of Malaysian peasants in the 1970s. As with these exploited peasants, so with the unemployed in Chicago forty years earlier we can see “in ridicule, in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of noncompliance...in resistant mutuality, in the disbelief in elite homilies, in the steady, grinding efforts to hold one’s own against overwhelming odds” a radical-left politics,³³ a kind of class struggle and implicit consciousness of class interests against the rich, albeit one handicapped by the distinctively American absence of a major labor party in the national political arena. In certain contexts, even self-preservation can be a political act.

When the poor aided the poor, and when the unemployed joined their more fortunate employed fellows on the picket line, and even when people grumbled about the absurdity of a social order that would deprive healthy men of the opportunity to make a living, an intrinsically subversive anti-capitalist mentality was manifesting itself. The mechanisms of “hegemony” had in part broken down: the legitimacy of the social structures that determined the U.S.’s political economy was being denied, and people were “taking matters into their own hands” by one means or another. This was far from unprecedented, of course. In fact, Immanuel Wallerstein was probably right that “it is doubtful if very many governments in human history have been considered ‘legitimate’ by the majority of those exploited, oppressed, and maltreated by their governments... Governments tend to be endured, not appreciated or admired or loved or even supported.”³⁴ Nonetheless, the 1930s did signify an eruption of counter-hegemonic thinking and behavior (including among the—rarely examined—unemployed), as the class struggle burst into the open.

Historians have sometimes downplayed the radicalism or revolutionary consciousness of the masses during the 1930s, preferring to emphasize the basic stability of the political economy, the conservative character of the New Deal, the relatively small numbers of people who became members of the Communist party, and the channeling of popular discontent into the Democratic Party. For example, in their 1977 article “Unemployment, Class Consciousness, and Radical Politics: What Didn’t Happen in the Thirties,” Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman argue

³³ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 350.

³⁴ Quoted in Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, 156.

that few American workers at the time were politically radical or “fully” class-conscious, in the sense of identifying with a class and believing that the interests of that class were opposed to the interests of others. Despite the Depression, they were in most cases optimistic about the long-term future and still favored the “American dream” of advancing through hard work and risk-taking.³⁵ Such interpretations are lent support by the writings of liberals in the 1930s who were disappointed, even bewildered, by what they saw as the passivity of most of the unemployed. Sherwood Anderson represented these views when he argued in 1936 that “There is in the average American a profound humbleness. People seem to blame themselves.”³⁶

In his aforementioned paper, Melvyn Dubofsky presents a sophisticated version of this “pessimistic” perspective. While acknowledging that the 1930s was in many respects a uniquely turbulent decade, he reminds us that workers to some extent remained divided by nationality, race, and religion, and that the majority almost never acted in a notably “militant” way. He quotes from Robert and Helen Lynd’s 1937 study of Muncie, Indiana: workers’ ambitions were “largely those of the business class: both are caught up in the tradition of a rising standard of living and lured by the enticements of salesmanship.” They “worshipped” the automobile as the symbol of the American dream, and preferred going for a drive to attending a union meeting. “Fear, resentment, insecurity, and disillusionment,” the Lynds wrote, “has been to Middletown’s [i.e., Muncie’s] workers largely an *individual* experience for each worker, and not a thing generalized by him into a ‘class’ experience.” Thus do the Lynds and Dubofsky embrace the Gramscian point of view that foregrounds cultural hegemony, especially in relation to “Middle America.” Dubofsky admits that the situation is somewhat different in more urban environments such as New Haven, where, according to a study by E. Wight Bakke in 1940, workers did not share the drives of the business class and did have a collective sense of their own class. “‘Hell, brother,’ a machinist told Bakke, ‘you don’t have to look to know there’s a workin’ class. We may not say so—but look at what we do. Work. Look at where we live. Nothing there but workers. Look at how we get along. Just like every other damned worker. Hell’s bells, of course there’s a workin’ class, and it’s gettin’ more so

³⁵ One is tempted to remark, however, that, if defined this way, the “American dream” was surely attractive not only to Americans but to people all over the Western world, and perhaps throughout much of history in many different societies. The concept of “success through hard work” is hardly an American invention. Nor should commitment to the “American dream” be assumed to preclude commitment to left-wing ideas and causes. See Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman, “Unemployment, Class Consciousness, and Radical Politics: What Didn’t Happen in the Thirties,” *Journal of Politics*, vol. 39, no. 2 (May 1977): 291–323.

³⁶ Quoted in Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–40* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 38.

every day.” Nevertheless, in New Haven, too, there was an absence of collective militancy, in large part because of workers’ realism about what was possible. “They regularly had had to adjust their goals to actual possibilities,” Dubofsky says, “which almost always fell far below their aspirations. As one worker after another informed Bakke, life involved putting up with it, grinning and bearing it, and using common sense to survive.”³⁷

This conclusion, it seems to me, gets to the crux of the matter. It certainly is possible to overestimate the class consciousness and militancy of America’s working class in the Depression. And it is surely the case that the lower classes, now and a century ago, tend to be integrated into the “dominant culture” in many respects, just as they are *not* integrated in many other respects. The question is to what extent we should emphasize their (and our) indoctrination with the ideas and values of the ruling class, and to what extent we should emphasize, in contrast, their (and our) independence, their rationality and understanding, their opposition to the hierarchies of power, their realism and pragmatism. I have argued that the Gramscian perspective, as an explanation of why capitalist society continues to function and why people do not continually rebel against its many injustices and indignities, must be subordinated to an explanation that simply invokes the threat of violence and the dull compulsion of institutional structures. *Prudence* and *realism*, that is, are better explanations of people’s broad “conformism”—in the 1930s and today—than mass delusion and indoctrination (“false consciousness,” “hegemony,” or whatever term one likes). In this study, therefore, I choose to highlight people’s rationality and realism, as well as their courage and opposition to dominant practices and values, rather than the ways in which they may have submitted to mainstream culture and accepted its commercial and individualistic values. This strikes me, moreover, as a more *interesting* interpretation than the Gramscian one put forward by Dubofsky and the Lynds in relation to Muncie, Indiana.

In the sixth chapter of the book, for example, where I consider the collective action of the unemployed, I address one of the major ways in which historians have downplayed the radicalism and class consciousness of Americans in this period. It has sometimes been remarked in the historiography that most of the unemployed were far less responsive to abstract Communist slogans about socialist revolution or ending imperialist wars than efforts to win concrete gains in

³⁷ Melvyn Dubofsky, “Not so ‘Turbulent Years’: A New Look at the 1930s,” in *Life and Labor: Dimensions of American Working-Class History*, eds. Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 205–223.

such forms as increased relief appropriations and better conditions in homeless shelters. Most of the time, it was not the nuances of Communist ideology that attracted people but (1) Communist actions in defense of the poor and (2) programmatic goals like national unemployment insurance and a shorter workweek. One might say, then, that people had the equivalent of a “trade-union consciousness” (concerned with “bread-and-butter” issues), not a “revolutionary consciousness.” And this conclusion may be largely correct, provided one recognize that no working class anywhere in the world has ever been different in this regard. As James C. Scott says, “the rank-and-file actors in most, if not all, revolutionary situations are in fact fighting for rather mundane, if vital, objectives that could in principle—but often not in practice—be accommodated within the prevailing social order.”³⁸ Better wages, better treatment, more control over production, perhaps a house of one’s own with some land—these are the sorts of demands that most often animate people, whether in the United States in the 1930s or Germany or Russia twenty years earlier. Barrington Moore has shown that factory workers in Russia just before the October revolution had as “pragmatic” a consciousness as any patriotic American might have had at the time, wanting, among other things, an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, severance pay in case of dismissal, and better toilet facilities. “The whole thrust of these demands,” Moore sums up, “was to improve working conditions, not to change them... Once again we see that the workers’ idea of a good society...is the present order with its most disagreeable features softened or eliminated.”³⁹

So, first of all, we should give up the remnants of American exceptionalism that seem present in Dubofsky’s paper, and in the “pessimistic” way of thinking about American workers that it represents. The main way in which America has been exceptional is simply in the brutality and aggressiveness of its capitalist class as compared to that of other countries.⁴⁰ With such an incomparably formidable adversary, it is hardly surprising that organized labor and the Left in the U.S. have frequently fared worse than their counterparts in France, Italy, England, and elsewhere. (Incidentally, like most social historians, Dubofsky plays down this crucial aspect of American society in his attempt to explain the failures of the Left in the 1930s, instead invoking “trade-union

³⁸ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 341.

³⁹ Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains: M. E. Sharpe, 1978), 369, quoted in Scott, 343.

⁴⁰ See Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The War on Labor and the Left: Understanding America’s Unique Conservatism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1991).

opportunism, corporate co-optation...New Deal liberalism,” and “the inability of most workers and their leaders to conceive of an alternative to the values of marketplace capitalism.”)⁴¹

But secondly, whatever left-wing intellectuals have thought about the ideological unsophistication or lack of class consciousness of the masses, the fact is that the skeptical attitude most Americans displayed toward Communism and “revolution” in the 1930s was in many ways more sensible, rational, and healthy than the ideological fanaticism—or, in more positive language, “theoretical consistency”—of committed Communists themselves.⁴² Was the skepticism in part a product of “bourgeois cultural hegemony” and hence “conservatism”? One can make that argument if one wants. But given conditions in Stalinist Russia, and given the prospects for a Communist revolution in the United States, and given the utopian nature of the ideology being proselytized and the frequently intolerant and offensive behavior of the proselytizers, the most natural conclusion is simply that the majority of unemployed and poor Americans were too *clear-headed* to throw themselves into a nationwide Communist movement (or the attempt to build one). They were hard-headed realists—ironically more so, in certain respects, than the Marxist dreamers who prided themselves on their realism. “Ordinary people” tended to stay close to the material foundation like good Marxists were supposed to, issues of survival, material comfort, achieving concrete gains, eroding the power of the rich (for instance by supporting FDR, as they saw it) without necessarily seeking to overthrow the entire social order, a goal they understood to be hopeless and deluded. Nor, again, was this true only of the *American* working class. The reason that the ideal of workers everywhere has usually been “the present order with its most disagreeable features softened or eliminated,” and not the overthrow of this order and creation of a new one, is that most people have a healthy common sense and a suspicion of utopian nostrums. *Not* that they are too indoctrinated by mainstream culture to think clearly.

This is not to say, however, that people are without ideology, nor that in their own ways they cannot be quite extreme left-wing radicals. The political program of an astonishingly broad swath of the American populace in the 1930s would, if enacted, have constituted in effect a

⁴¹ Dubofsky, “Not So ‘Turbulent Years,’” 223.

⁴² As it happens, even the most doctrinaire Marxists among them were not theoretically consistent, and did not really understand Marxism or have the type of class consciousness that “sophistication” requires. I establish this in chapters four and six of *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution*. The fact that even Leninists, who have always prided themselves on their theoretical sophistication, have an essentially incoherent ideology shows what a chimera is the notion of “correct” consciousness as opposed to the consciousness corrupted by bourgeois hegemony and incoherence. There can be no litmus tests in these matters.

revolution without a revolution. Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California campaign, Huey Long's Share Our Wealth program, Charles Coughlin's overwhelmingly left-wing radio broadcasts in 1934 and 1935 ("Capitalism is doomed and not worth trying to save"), and the immensely popular Lundein Bill, introduced in Congress in 1934 and 1935 in opposition to the more conservative Social Security Act, all amounted to full-on class war against the rich.⁴³ But also in more subtle ways—as I show throughout this study—the unemployed in Chicago had a rather mature understanding of class conflict, if typically an understanding that incorporated attitudes of political cynicism and resignation to the largely individualized (or at least family-centered) nature of survival in urban America. Such attitudes were thoroughly rational and realistic; nevertheless, I particularly try to highlight the ways in which people overcame their isolation and built community even on the basis of "atomizing" unemployment.

In a longer study I might have included a chapter that generalizes beyond the Great Depression to argue that the large majority of people have a primarily left-wing, in some ways even anarchist and Marxist, ideological framework (though of course one full of inconsistencies and lacunae). This is not a difficult argument to make. For instance, one can use polls to show that the American public has social democratic values. Even in the 1980s, when conservatism was ascendant in politics and elite culture, the public remained broadly left-wing. On environmental regulation, a major poll in 1983 found that 58 percent of people supported the radical proposition that "protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing environmental improvements must be made regardless of cost." Another 1983 poll found that 74 percent supported a jobs program for the unemployed even if it meant increasing the size of the federal deficit. In 1986, 66 percent of the public thought that "government should spend money now on efforts similar to those of the Great Society programs to help the poor people." Large majorities supported keeping regulations on industrial safety, offshore oil drilling, auto emission and safety standards, and the teenage minimum wage. In 1979, 79 percent of the public thought there was too much power concentrated in the hands of a few large companies for the good of the nation. More recently, a Pew Research Center poll in 2015 found that, while only 27 percent of Americans are bothered "a lot" by the amount they pay in taxes, 61 percent are bothered a lot by the feeling that the wealthy do not pay their fair share. Eighty-four percent thought money has too much influence in political campaigns. In early 2015, 75 percent of

⁴³ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 238–240.

Americans supported raising the federal minimum wage to \$12.50 by 2020 (and 63 percent wanted it raised to \$15). A year later, 58 percent supported replacing the Affordable Care Act with a federally funded healthcare program providing insurance for all Americans, and 59 percent of likely 2016 voters supported the radical idea of expanding Social Security to Americans of all ages “so that everyone has a guaranteed minimum income.” By and large, it seems that most people are far more leftist than the business, political, and intellectual elite.⁴⁴

Instead of exploring these matters, however, I confine myself to elaborating on Robert McElvaine’s argument that the 1930s saw a shift leftward in the values and practices of the American people, a shift towards community, cooperation, and generosity. I also accept Lizabeth Cohen’s argument that the Depression caused workers and the unemployed to turn from welfare capitalists, local charities, and ethnic associations to unions and the federal government as guarantors of economic security. Where I go further than she is to argue (in chapter six) that this shift in attitude is another indication that, despite their demoralizing experiences, the unemployed tended to be far from apathetic and apolitical, that in fact it was common for them to have a more sensible and realistic politics than many of the Communists who tried to organize them. They knew that the world is not a just place, that it was hopeless to try to create a workers’ government or to construct a classless utopia. In their own way they were fighting against a bourgeois ideological hegemony by insisting, through protest marches and letters to politicians (among other means), that the government must radically intervene in the economy to curb the excesses of capitalism. Ordinary people decisively rejected the old ideology of “limited government” and paved the way for the New Deal. (As we’ll see, most wanted a much more radical version of the New Deal.)

I should note, though it is probably already evident, that in this study I somewhat reconceptualize the idea of class struggle, broadening it in several ways. Above I equated the term to “the structure and functioning of economic institutions,” by which I meant the objective antagonism of interests between capitalist and worker. This “objectivist” understanding of the

⁴⁴ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 14–16; Pew Research Center, “Federal Tax System Seen in Need of Overhaul,” March 19, 2015, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/03/19/federal-tax-system-seen-in-need-of-overhaul/>; “Americans’ Views on Money in Politics,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2015; National Employment Law Project, “New Poll Shows Overwhelming Support for Major Minimum Wage Increase,” January 15, 2015; Gallup, “Majority in U.S. Support Idea of Fed-Funded Healthcare System,” May 16, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/191504/majority-support-idea-fed-funded-healthcare-system.aspx>; Progressive Change Institute, “Poll of Likely 2016 Voters,” https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.boldprogressives.org/images/Big_Ideas-Polling_PDF-1.pdf. See also Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

concept, while implicit in Marx's writings, amounts to an appropriation of Ste. Croix's use of it in his magnificent 1981 study of the ancient Greek world quoted earlier. Ste. Croix points out that class struggle need not involve collective action or activity on a political plane, and it need not even be accompanied by "class consciousness" or an *awareness* of "struggle" at all.⁴⁵ But furthermore, on the basis of this understanding I extend the notion even further and treat the efforts of the poor and the unemployed to survive in a hostile world as themselves a manifestation of class struggle, and as being implicitly political. For—to be somewhat glib—they certainly involved struggles against authorities and their (class-based) prioritization of "fiscal austerity" (to use an anachronistic term), and they grew out of class. Working-class efforts to survive, and to resist, were and are essential products of exploitative class dynamics. They also frequently involved collective solidarity, the solidarity of the poor with the poor. In contexts of severe deprivation, the mere fact of surviving can be a type of resistance to dominant social structures, a way of asserting oneself against realities of class and power that are, in effect, organized to crush one under the boot of the ruling class or even, in some cases, to erase one's existence. For most people, fighting daily for the survival of their family and collectively fighting employers or relief authorities or pro-business political policies are not sharply separated activities, the latter belonging to "class struggle" and the former not. Such distinctions are artificial and arbitrary, mere intellectual contrivances. The whole existence of the poor tends to incorporate a kind of generalized and diffuse class struggle and class consciousness—perhaps not a theoretically sophisticated consciousness, but a realistic one.

I'll elaborate on these arguments in later chapters, when I discuss the "class consciousness" of particular (types of) actors. It may be noted here, however, that such ideas recall James C. Scott's arguments in (among other writings) his 1989 paper "Everyday Forms of Resistance," where under the broad category of the paper's title he lists acts such as "foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, [and] anonymous threats." "These techniques," he observes, "for the most part quite prosaic, are the ordinary means of class struggle."⁴⁶ Against the charge that he makes the concept of class resistance overly inclusive, Scott marshals a number of arguments, for instance that when such activities are sufficiently generalized

⁴⁵ Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 44, 57.

⁴⁶ James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Copenhagen Papers*, no. 4 (1989): 33–62.

to become a *pattern* of resistance, their relevance to class conflict is clear. (As we'll see, activities like pilfering, dissimulation to relief authorities, false compliance with unreasonable conditions for receiving relief, and anonymous threats against state legislatures, not to mention collective protests, were indeed generalized patterns of resistance among the Depression's unemployed.) We might paraphrase Scott's definition as follows: lower-class resistance is any act by a member of a given class that is intended either to mitigate or to deny claims made on that class by superordinate classes or to advance its own claims (e.g., to work, land, charity, or respect) vis-à-vis these superordinate classes. Even when workers shirk on the job or when the poor try by any means to obtain resources for themselves, class resistance to dominant institutions and inegalitarian value-systems is occurring...

[For the rest of the chapter, see the [dissertation](#) itself.]