Balancing Acts: American Thought and Culture in the 1930s
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During the 1930s it was hard to escape the reach of politics. Much of the intellectual discussion of the period was drawn in one way or another toward the problems presented by the depression, toward the adequacy of recovery and reform measures, and toward the competition of values and ideologies at home and abroad. Programs born in the nation's capital touched the lives of individuals and communities throughout the country, making a previously rare influence seem common. Federal action began to redefine the place of at least some economic and social groups, and federal dollars became a major force in the arts. All of this activity meant change but seldom upheaval. What did and did not happen in the politics of the thirties provides an important set of readings on the development of American culture.

A variety of movements operated outside the two dominant political parties or sprang up on their fringes during the depression. There can be little doubt, however, that what stood at the center of political life in the 1930s, and what left the greatest mark on American society, was the administration of Franklin Roosevelt. The very idea of what "government" implied, the images conjured up by the term, and the effects on people's lives that its use assumed, were significantly altered by the New Deal. Before Roosevelt came to office, as William Leuchtenburg has reminded us, local communities in normal times had only limited contact with national government:

If you had walked into an American town in 1932, you would have had a hard time detecting any sign of a federal presence, save perhaps for the post office and even many of today's post offices date from the 1930s. Washington rarely affected people's lives directly. There was no national old-age pension system, no federal unemployment compensation, no
aid to dependent children, no federal housing, no regulation of the stock market, no withholding tax, no federal school lunch, no farm subsidy, no national minimum wage law, no welfare state.¹

By the end of the 1930s, most of these programs would be in place and communities would have been touched by many relief measures that would not outlive the depression.

An altered relationship between government and the economy reshaped experience on Main Street. Before the 1930s, business and financial leaders were largely free to make important economic decisions as they saw fit. Despite the clamor surrounding antitrust campaigns and early twentieth-century regulatory legislation, and despite the brief period of extensive federal controls during World War I, the national government had taken explicit economic actions within quite limited contexts, mostly in conjunction with efforts to protect or aid private business interests. Out of the New Deal grew a revised balance of public and private that would soon earn the label “a mixed economy.” Now the stock market would be regulated by federal laws and by the Securities and Exchange Commission, which sought to establish some minimal level of financial and ethical probity. Fiscal and monetary policy would come to the fore as more conscious tools of economic adjustment. Labor-management relations would develop within a legal framework that established minimum wages and maximum hours for many workers and defined guidelines for union organization and collective bargaining under the oversight of the National Labor Relations Board. And agriculture would be supported through an extensive array of federal subsidies and loans. As some commentators have put the case, the United States had developed a national economy during the first third of the twentieth century; the New Deal created a political framework to match the scale of this economy and to provide at least some mechanisms of management and support.

Whether from the perspective of a corporate boardroom or a bungalow kitchen, the winds of change in the 1930s seemed to honor Franklin Roosevelt as their Aeolus. Roosevelt, through the force of his personality and actions, created new expectations for the presidency and became himself something of a cultural phenomenon. With Roosevelt’s arrival, the White House began to tremble with ideas, legislative proposals, and executive pronouncements that issued not as occasional breezes but in gusts and gales. This storm of activity gained its limited measure of coherence from the simple fact that it was identified with the president, and during the thirties even legislation that Roosevelt supported only weakly or late became inextricably associated with his name. Roosevelt was the symbol of the enlarged scope of the federal government, the new colossus of the Democratic party, whose appeal helped bring about one of the major political realignments in American history as the Republican party was unseated from the position of general dominance it had held since the 1850s.

In this political cartoon by Edwin Marcus, which appeared in the New York Times of 18 November 1934, Franklin Roosevelt is a master of two strategies and two outlooks. The violin as an instrument of classical music representing aesthetic culture and an established order provides a symbol for conservatism. The saxophone, powerfully associated in the 1920s and 1930s with jazz, popular music, and youthful liberation, suggests the venturousness of bold policies. The cartoon indicates clearly that the two-sidedness of Roosevelt’s political appeal was recognized early in his presidency. And Uncle Sam was not alone in responding favorably to the balancing of tradition-oriented continuity and reform-minded activism. By permission of Donald E. Marcus
The president also put himself in the forefront of the news and of the nation's political consciousness. Roosevelt welcomed reporters to the White House twice a week, calling them by name and bantering with them as he turned their questions to his own advantage. Similarly, he saw the potential in the still-new medium of radio and used it masterfully to win support for his leadership and his program. People heard a warmth in his voice and felt a new kind of personal contact with this president. (Before radio, only a limited number of people could ever have heard a president's voice). During Roosevelt's first year in office, the daily mail brought ten times as many letters to the White House—some 6,000 to 8,000 per day—as had arrived in peak periods during the Hoover administration, and an era of mass political letter-writing was born. Such remarkable public appeal carried lasting cultural force. John Garraty has pointed out that though there was significant social reform and more substantial economic recovery in Great Britain than in the United States during the 1930s, the period entered that nation's cultural memory as "a time of inactivity and decline—the Great Slump." No political figure was able to move the British people or to rouse enthusiasm for a campaign against the depression as Roosevelt did in this country. In making himself the dominant American political figure of the thirties, Roosevelt also shaped the way the period would be experienced and understood—as a time of action and energy, not of decline and drift. Americans of the 1990s, worrying over the decaying infrastructure of a troubled American economy, have reinforced that positive perception in looking frequently to the federal projects of the 1930s as a model for the concerted action they believe necessary.

The instincts and choices that combined to form Roosevelt's cultural and political style were plainly apparent in his response to the new administration's first major test, the banking crisis of 1933. Unlike the banking system in most industrialized countries, American banking depended not on a few centralized institutions with many branches but on thousands of independent banks whose ability to establish branch offices was severely restricted. Generally small, subject only to varying state regulations, and often without adequate reserves or security for deposits, most banks were ill prepared to face the economic pressures brought on by the depression. When funds loaned to finance stock speculation disappeared with the drop in values, when farmers and small businessmen could not make payments on their mortgages and loans, the assets of weaker banks fell dangerously. And as some institutions collapsed, worried depositors demanding their money launched "runs" on other banks that quickly exhausted the currency available. The problem became acute late in 1932 and reached a panic stage by February 1933 when the governors of Michigan, Maryland, and other states felt compelled to order a temporary closure of all banks. On Roosevelt's inauguration day, 4 March 1933, with banks in 38 states already shut down, the governors of New York and Illinois added their states to the list, and the New York Stock Exchange closed its doors. This was crisis indeed.

Roosevelt did not hesitate to act. On the evening of his first day as president, he instructed the secretary of the treasury to have a new banking bill drafted within five days. The next afternoon he called for a special session of Congress to convene on 9 March, stopped all movements in gold (which had been leaving America for Europe), and declared a bank "holiday" throughout the nation. The financial emergency was so apparent that when Congress met, it was more than ready to follow Roosevelt's lead. In the early afternoon of the ninth, a banking bill was read to the House from the one copy available; within an hour it had been approved on a voice vote without dissent. With minor opposition, the Senate endorsed the bill in the early evening, and the president quickly signed it into law. The Emergency Banking Act of 1933 expanded presidential authority over transactions in gold, established procedures for the reorganization of banks, provided for new supplies of currency through the Federal Reserve System, and organized the reopening of stronger banks. On 12 March Roosevelt delivered the first of his "fireside chats," explaining what had been done and offering reassurance that citizens could now depend on their banks once more. When stronger institutions opened again on Monday, 13 March, more money was deposited than withdrawn. The banking emergency had been brought under control.

Failing banks and frozen assets conveyed more than an economic threat for those who regarded savings accounts as emblems of their virtue, status, and security. Communities and neighborhoods across the country felt the blow, and they knew that deliverance from further disaster had come at the hands of the federal government. The Emergency Banking Act had taken immediate steps; within the first "Hundred Days" of the New Deal, other reform measures followed. Among these was the establishment of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), putting the authority of the federal government behind the security of deposits in member banks up to a specified limit. Between 1929 and 1933 the number of banks in the United States had fallen by more than 10,000, with the number of bank failures rising from 659 in 1929 to 4,004 in 1933. With the reforms of the New Deal, the number of failures dropped to 61 in 1934, and the number of banks remained stable for the next four decades. People almost certainly did not think about the FDIC or other banking measures on a daily basis; other federal programs of the thirties claimed more continuing attention. Yet saving local banks and offering guarantees for millions of modest individual accounts delivered an important double message. These steps promised continuity by building buttresses for existing local structures and values; at the same time, they pledged corrective change, providing an early signal of an expanded federal presence and a new governmental interest in protecting individual citizens (especially, perhaps, the kinds of citizens who had savings accounts).

Some had expected more radical action. A few had thought that the president might call for the nationalization of banking and were disappointed when
In John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, small farmers driven off the land by drought, poverty, and tractors migrate westward to California. The Joad family, which stands at the center of the tale, endures a string of hardships, finding their best haven for a time in a migrant camp run by the federal government. In this scene from the movie version of the story, local authorities close to powerful state interests seek to intimidate the migrants but are restrained by the intervention of the camp's manager, a figure resembling Franklin Roosevelt who asserts federal authority on the side of the common people. Regardless of the observer's perspective, government presented more than one face in the 1930s. *Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive*

he did not. Surely if Roosevelt had been inclined to seek a fundamental economic restructuring, the circumstances in March 1933, including the receptivity of Congress, offered a unique opportunity to do so. But Roosevelt sought no revolution. In a speech to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco during the 1932 campaign, Roosevelt had described economic control by government as a "last resort, to be tried only when private initiative, . . . with such assistance and balance as government can give, has finally failed." There had as yet been no such failure, as he saw it, because there had as yet been no proper attempt to remedy the current difficulties. Roosevelt had no desire to destroy the private economy; rather, he declared his confidence that much of its structure could be preserved with the help of government. The notions of "assistance and balance" could have quite different meanings for different people, but they clearly implied that new economic institutions or controls would rise beside older forms, not as a replacement for them.

The banking crisis also helped demonstrate the difference that an individual leader could make. Roosevelt had already shown that he understood the techniques of gaining public attention to deliver the cultural and political messages he wanted heard. When nominated by the Democratic party, Roosevelt had flown dramatically through wind and storm to deliver the first convention acceptance speech in American history, rejecting the expectation that a candidate should feign ignorance of his nomination until officially informed weeks later. Last anyone miss the point, Roosevelt declared his own action "symbolic" of the intent to break, not all traditions, but "absurd traditions" and "foolish traditions" in attacking the nation's problems. In his inaugural address the president declared that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," a claim that was neither new nor entirely true. Reflecting a widespread appreciation that the depression was not just an economic but a psychological condition, Roosevelt's assertion announced, more than anything else, that he was not afraid, that he was ready to act, and that he expected popular support. Biblical imagery and patriotic references rooted the address in familiar cultural traditions, but firm language proclaimed that the nation was about to take a new course. Roosevelt began to break the gloom of depression by providing an opportunity for hope, and the stream of letters to the White House began.

The fireside chat on banking thus came within a context of symbolism and promise that Roosevelt had already established, yet it added elements of its own. In taking to the radio, Roosevelt was not speaking to the public through some immediate audience at a convention or inauguration but addressing people directly in their homes. His tone was not formal, anxious, or awkward, but comfortable and familiar, conveying a confidence rooted in his own secure sense of identity. He explained in simple language how banks worked, what had created the crisis, and what steps the government had taken to resolve it. Now, with the machinery of restoration in place, "it is up to you to support and make it work." Only those Americans "who have not recovered from their fear" would make withdrawals. People and government together would triumph. Roosevelt was suggesting that Americans could do much to overcome the depression simply by believing that they could; he was making his personality an instrument for direct political appeal to an entire population; and he was attempting to construct a close sense of contact between the people and their national government. Moreover, he was once again both emphasizing a change in the direction of the country and assuring Americans that "there is nothing complex, or radical, in the process."

The New Deal would measure up as one of the most important periods of social reform and economic adjustment in American history. Frequent assertions that no fundamental upheaval was taking place served in part as a form of public reassurance, providing a degree of political protection. Yet these same assertions reflected accurately the assumption of most New Dealers that
they would regulate some institutions, make others work more effectively, and construct programs of their own within the general framework of the existing political and economic system. The new would rise beside the old. Business executives would continue to make important economic decisions, but they would not hold such power alone. Wall Street would manipulate capital, but financial authority would now rest at least as heavily in Washington. Change would serve the end of long-term stability. From the distance of several decades, a fundamental concern with continuity is easy to discern. Yet at the time, the New Deal seemed to some a betrayal of the most basic American principles, a radical threat to the nation’s identity and character. The values and ideas at stake seemed worthy of the most passionate response.

Responsibilities Individual and Social

The most powerful opposition to the New Deal during the 1930s came from the right of the political spectrum, from those who thought that government was doing too much. In 1933 this opposition was restrained. Although Roosevelt had faced resistance in his pursuit of the Democratic nomination, and although a sizable share of the voters in 1932 had supported Hoover (as is true for the losers of even lopsided elections), the situation bordered closely enough on the desperate by early 1933 that few sought to stand in the way of vigorous presidential action. The New Deal rapidly changed the nation’s mood and put many Americans back on the road to political confidence. Within months after the legislative blitz of the Hundred Days, various groups began to complain about the consequences of specific programs, to demand more, or to challenge the direction of the New Deal in general.

By 1935 the New Deal was being pushed toward bolder legislation by rising labor activism in the industrial unions that formed the Committee for (changed in 1938 to Congress of) Industrial Organizations. The CIO would continue to provide both a support and a leftward prod for Roosevelt. Other popular movements were constructing more ambiguous political identities. Francis Townsend’s pension-plan movement made older Americans a political force and helped spur social security legislation in 1935, but the movement rapidly came apart over internal corruption and split alliances. Father Charles Coughlin, the “Radio Priest,” built a mass audience supporting the early New Deal before turning against Roosevelt. In 1936 he attempted disastrously to form a new party with Townsend and the fascist sympathizer Gerald L. K. Smith, who attacked African-Americans, Jews, atheists, and “communists in the Roosevelt administration” while referring to the president himself as a “cripple.” After 1938 Coughlin, too, descended entirely into bigotry. Louisiana Governor, then Senator, Huey Long became an audacious political force challenging Roosevelt with his “Share Our Wealth” program and a style that made some fear dictatorship. Long was stopped by an assassin’s bullet in September 1935, leaving some of his followers to trail off behind Smith. Alan Brinkley has argued that the Long and Coughlin movements, whatever the quirks of their leaders, represented neither antidemocratic uprisings nor a progressive tide but rather a powerful “urge to defend the autonomy of the individual and the independence of the community against encroachments from the modern industrial state.” A declining localist tradition thus blended hope and resentment in its challenges to the New Deal. Community values both included and excluded, and the same localism that spurred opposition to centralized and impersonal power embraced anti-Semitism or racial caste.

Different intellectual foundations supported a more enduring resistance to the New Deal that was quite consistently identified with the political right. The prospect and reality of expanding governmental activity appeared for conservatives of both major parties a threat to their entire understanding of the world. That understanding often began with an assumption at some level that the economic universe functioned according to natural laws that were beyond human control. These laws were regarded as absolute truths, as parts of a right ordering of social activity that carried strong moral implications. As Adam Smith had argued in 1776, economic responsibility should rest with the individual, who in pursuing his or her own self-interest within a free competitive framework, helped create the greatest advantage for all under the guidance of an “invisible hand.” The law of supply and demand, when allowed to operate freely, guaranteed long-term progress. Because the proper functioning system was driven by individual initiative, ambition was to take the form of hard work, which made the best use of time and resources, prevented dissipation, and resulted in greater productivity. All effort was thus shaped by a personal character able to resist the blandishments of the world and to uphold, in the ideal at least, high standards of integrity and conduct. This perspective as well, a system of unrestricted capitalism was inherently just because people got what they deserved: the rich had presumably earned their favored place, while the poor were responsible for their own fate through deficiencies of ability and effort. On such premises, it was easy to confuse the existing social hierarchy with a moral one.

By the 1930s this individualistic outlook had come under considerable pressure as developments in the American economy undermined many of the assumptions about opportunity and fair competition on which it was based. Yet it had also demonstrated a stubborn resilience. Individualist values helped make the idea of private property rights almost sacred, and the relationship between individualism and property proved adaptable and subject to indefinite extension. Using a legal fiction defining the corporation as an individual, for example, the Supreme Court for decades had turned the 14th Amendment to the protection of business interests, in ironic contrast to precepts limiting governmental intervention. Conceptions of rights based on local community practice and on long experience in the assertion of “states’ rights” joined
with and reinforced individualist tenets. The mingling strains had in common their strong distrust of an activist government that might restrict the powers of property, challenge the moral assumptions of individual responsibility, or disturb the social arrangements of town or region. And their advocates took the principles and privileges they defended to be the very essence of American constitutionalism and democracy.

Limits on the range of acceptable policy were posted at the beginning of the thirties. Hoover's secretary of the treasury, Andrew Mellon, and many leading economists argued not simply that the depression must be left to cure itself by natural correctives but that the process would have beneficial effects, providing just punishment for the sinfulness of waste, poor quality, and excessive wage scales while making room for the stronger, more hardworking, and more efficient. President Hoover himself did not equate virtue with inaction or deny all governmental responsibility; indeed, he did more than any previous president to respond to depression. Yet Hoover's actions constantly confronted the limits set by his principles. Because the character sustained by "American ideals and American institutions" had to be preserved, drought, hunger, and suffering could be addressed only in "the spirit of charity and mutual self-help through voluntary giving and the responsibility of local government," not through national action. Businessmen could be urged to take voluntary steps to maintain employment and wages, but for government to act directly was to risk a "centralized despotism" that threatened "not only our American system but with it our progress and freedom." Hoover did bring himself to accept by 1932 the creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to make stabilizing loans to certain banks, businesses, and lower levels of government, but to the lasting detriment of his reputation, he rejected any form of direct federal relief to the millions of unemployed and the destitute. Lines of principle embodied fixed truths, the bases of all values.

Franklin Roosevelt's attitudes were by this standard shocking. "We must lay hold of the fact," Roosevelt said at one point, "that economic laws are not made by nature. They are made by human beings." To this a conservative Boston newspaper responded in dismay, "Two more glaring misstatements of the truth could hardly have been packed into so little space." For those who embraced the precepts of natural law and economic individualism as the only "truth," it was difficult to accept a leader who suggested that people and governments could act to shape their own truths. Indeed, to its own most passionate adherents, the integrated system of automatic adjustments, assured progress, just hierarchy, and limited government seemed remarkably vulnerable. Moving away from the individualistic view of the world even a few steps brought cries of calamitous danger and gross betrayal.

The expansion of the federal government under the New Deal became, by these lights, a radical abandonment of American political principles and a leap toward centralized authority and collectivism. The newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst helped set the tone in late 1933 when he assailed the National Industrial Recovery Act as "absolute state socialism" and "a menace to political rights and constitutional liberties." A year later such themes became the rallying cry of a new organization dedicated to Roosevelt's political defeat, the American Liberty League. An organization founded mainly by a circle of conservative, often wealthy Democrats, including the former national party chairman John Raskob, two members of the Du Pont family, and two previous Democratic presidential candidates, John W. Davis and Al Smith, the Liberty League attracted more than 100,000 members and spent over $1 million assailing the New Deal between 1934 and 1936.

The president of the league, Jouett Shouse, in a radio address of mid-1935, defined the organization's purposes as defending the Constitution and protecting "personal and property rights" in the face of an ominous threat. The Roosevelt administration had broken with established tradition, Shouse complained, by preparing bills at the White House and sending them to Congress "with orders that they should be passed without change" and without adequate debate. Roosevelt had criticized recent Supreme Court decisions overturning early New Deal legislation, demonstrating, as Shouse would have it, that both the laws and the criticism were parts of a calculated assault on the proper limits of national and presidential authority. The "dangerous un-American and undemocratic authority of the appointed bureaucrats" who were for the moment in "absolute control" had led to administrative actions that "veered from the extremes of fascism to the limits of socialism." Indeed, Shouse claimed, the legislation of the early New Deal better represented the platform of the Socialist party than the Democratic. To the Liberty League, the changes taking place boded a revolutionary overthrow of individualism and democracy, of freedom and opportunity, that violated the very meaning of the United States as a nation.

Writing some years later, Herbert Hoover demonstrated in his memoirs that the battle to control the meaning of the New Deal was still being waged. In addition to advancing once more the argument that the depression would have ended sooner if natural economic processes had been allowed to run their course, Hoover did his best to condemn the steps taken under Roosevelt not simply as unwise but as alien to American tradition. The guiding phrase for the New Deal, according to Hoover, was "Planned Economy." This phrase had no legitimate native roots, for it was an "emanation from the caldrons" of "all three European collectivist forms"—Communism, Socialism, and Fascism. With a "typical collectivist torture of meaning," the expression "Planned Economy" served as a "disguise" for "governmental execution and dictation" and "centralization of power." Scholars of the period have sometimes criticized Roosevelt for not building a strong reform organization; Hoover insisted that the New Dealers had tried to construct a "traditional 'mass movement'" like those accompanying "Russian Communism, German National Socialism, and Italian Fascism."

True Americans, Hoover suggested, looked only to ideas that were certifiably "American," not to products of some European witches' brew; to individualism, not to collectivism; to a democracy of independent voices and limited
government, not to a system of mass politics and centralization. Hoover had known from the start that “the character and purposes of the men coming into power were not those of traditional America.” Fortunately, the “schemes” of New Deal politicians, the “attempt to revolutionize the American system of life,” had been at least partly thwarted by the “traditional American love of freedom and devotion to constitutional processes.” Hoover made it his purpose to affirm “the rightness of the American manner of life” that had been betrayed during the “disaster” of the New Deal.6

Those who spoke from a perspective like Hoover’s nearly always assumed that what constituted the American way—the one acceptable framework of values and policies—was clear and indisputable. Without such a fixed conception of what “American” meant, a term like “un-American” made little sense. Those who became New Dealers, by contrast, tended to find such definitions cramped and narrow-minded; their own arguments generally assumed a more complex and more open conception of what had been and might be “American.” It was not that the architects, supporters, or even friendly critics of the New Deal lacked commitments to particular views of the nation’s purposes or to particular values; these they had aplenty. Rather it was that both the nature of these views and the number of competing ideas under the same political roof encouraged diversity. In their variety as well as in their specific content, the assumptions and the claims of the New Deal challenged the fixed truths of individualism and their hold on national tradition. The political battles over the meaning of the New Deal, both at the time and since, have contributed to a continuing struggle to define American identity.

Those who supported substantial reform in the early 1930s took it for granted that individualism as a comprehensive outlook was outmoded and in need, at the very least, of major revision. The historian Charles Beard put the case with characteristic intensity in 1931: “The cold truth is that the individualist creed of everybody for himself and the devil take the hindmost is principally responsible for the distress in which Western civilization finds itself. . . . Whatever merits the creed may have had in days of primitive agriculture and industry, it is not applicable in an age of technology, science, and rationalized economy.”

Beard’s remark touched on several related notions. One held that though the pursuit of self-interest might have served under the economic and social conditions of a previous era, the tenets of such a system could no longer apply. Reflecting the contemporary influence of Frederick Jackson Turner’s emphasis on the settlement of new land as central to the American past, many pointed out that the frontier had now disappeared and with it the wide-open opportunities and rapid economic growth that had supported individualist values. Some gave the new confrontation of limits a worldwide perspective, suggesting the winding down of a cycle of rapid changes promoted by industrialization. European imperialism and American “pioneering” had claimed most of the lands susceptible to their control; the natural resources that had been opened up were now being used up; the integration of the world through rev-

olutions in transportation and communication and the development of enormous business and financial organizations could not continue at the pace of the last century; even rapid population expansion seemed to be slowing down. By the early 1930s there were “ominous signs,” as Frederick Lewis Allen put it, “that the great age of inevitable expansion was over,” requiring adjustments in economic institutions as well as in the “mental habits” of Americans.18

The emergence of large corporations seemed to undermine the system of individualism on other grounds as well. In a landmark study in 1932, Adolph Berle, Jr., an early Roosevelt adviser, and Gardiner C. Means argued that major American industries had generally come to be dominated by a few large firms quite capable of interfering with any capacity of the market to regulate the volume of production and the level of prices. They also pointed out that a considerable gap had opened up between traditional notions of ownership and the big-business pattern of control by corporate executives with the bulk of the shareholders (the presumptive “owners”) kept at a safe distance. As a leading work in business history has emphasized, this “managerial revolution” implied an economy shaped less by the “invisible hand” of natural law than by the “visible hand” of corporate managers. Moreover, the large scale of modern businesses meant that employers seldom knew most of their employees, that the idea of establishing individual contracts and recognizing the merits of individual workers had become something of a myth, and that mobility from factory floor or clerical desk into upper management was extremely rare. Bureaucratic organization demanded predictability and obedience; below the level of the very few corporate leaders, Berle and Means concluded, “individual initiative no longer exists.” Both the model of the economy and the standards of merit on which the individualistic outlook relied seemed out of touch with contemporary realities.19

These judgments were reinforced by the belief, as Beard expressed it, that the creed of individualism was inappropriate to an age of “science” and a “rationalized economy.” What these terms meant was, of course, subject to dispute. Herbert Hoover had an engineering background and encouraged economic rationalization during his tenure as secretary of commerce in the 1920s, but he would never have accepted Beard’s conclusions or his concept of science. What “science” suggested to many sympathizers with New Deal reform was a growth of knowledge that allowed humans to take intelligent control of economic and social life. There was no longer any need to rely on millions of individual decisions presumably disciplined by the invisible workings of suprahuman law. A rationalized industrial economy had already been extensively shaped and structured by human agency; the point was to turn that economy consciously to the benefit of the whole community. For many reformers, individualism as a creed denied the capacities of science applied to society and blocked the changes adequate to the needs of the present.

What then did New Dealers propose? The answer must be that they offered not one unified program with a single justification but a series of
responses supported by different arguments. As Thomas McCraw has pointed out, accurate statements about the New Deal may appear quite inconsistent with one another: the agricultural programs of the New Deal included the first attempts to help farmers in poverty, yet the largest farmers benefited from the New Deal, with tenant farmers and sharecroppers gaining least; the New Deal did much to help banks and leading corporations, yet most bankers and business executives hated Roosevelt and worked against the New Deal. The New Deal simply refused to obey any intellectual god, and before the smiling acceptance of Franklin Roosevelt contradictions fell powerless to dissuade. To those who saw themselves as advocates of a consistent policy based on firm principle, the absence of system and center was itself a cause for alarm.

In the 1930s, as Richard Hofstadter noted many years ago, it was not the reformers but the opponents of reform who dominated the “traffic in moral absolutes” as they decried the conglomerate mix of the New Deal.

Perhaps in part because their opponents turned moralistic, and in part because reformers had learned something about the risks of idealism during previous decades, New Dealers tended to avoid righteous or sentimental appeals while emphasizing the practical, the specific, and the realistic. Roosevelt deliberately adopted a plain style and a common language in his public speeches. His supporters placed their emphasis on economic problems, not moral reformation; on institutional adjustments, not utopian ideals; on the details of work projects, not the trials and hopes of the workers. No pathos intervened when a New Dealer declaimed the tons of cement and sand in the Grand Coulee Dam, for this was indeed concrete reality. This bias, and a sometimes ill-considered faith that good information would lead to good policy, gave a considerable boost during the 1930s to the collection of social and economic statistics. Certainly New Dealers aspired to raise the quality of human life by improving the social and economic environment—and this itself was a form of idealism. But the ethos of the depression, the desire to appear tough-minded, the fascination with mechanism and detail, meant that social ideals would seldom be deployed in the rhetorical front lines of the New Deal.

Faith in the human ability to shape social conditions did find expression in the activism of the New Deal, in the emphatic rejection of the notion that people must suffer depression quietly. By contrast with Hoover, who had come to seem (whether fairly or not) incapable of action, Roosevelt identified himself with the vigorous pursuit of new policies from the start. During his presidential campaigns he had called for “bold persistent experimentations,” and his astute sense of the need for bustling activity on the part of government was evident in his remark: “It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

As the New Deal unfolded, advocates of reform spoke of the practicality, not just the desirability, of eliminating slums; abolishing child labor and sweatshop conditions; helping people buy houses or hold on to their farms; and providing aid to needy children, the disabled, the aged, and the unemployed. The very fact of frenetic governmental action, as well as the particular measures taken, ran counter to basic individualistic assumptions and sharpened ideological lines in the 1930s.

So, too, did the idea of planning, as Hoover’s attack on the New Deal made clear. In the early 1930s talk of social and economic planning was widespread. The concept was versatile enough to respond both to the conviction that the industrial system had grown too rapidly, with resultant imbalance and waste, and to the sense that an increasingly complex and technologically sophisticated economy required conscious integration and guidance to develop smoothly. Planning promised to provide the best allocation of limited resources and to ensure a balance between production and consumption. Because it would necessarily entail special knowledge, sophisticated thought, and careful calculation, the idea of planning appealed especially to intellectuals and professionals—groups that had been drawn into government by the New Deal as never before—who might be expected to play a major role in the process. Some concept of the public good as a controlling compass lay behind most notions of planning, and it was usually taken for granted that the general interest could be readily determined and that objectivity would flow naturally from knowledge and expertise.

For those furthest toward the left in the New Deal spectrum, an emphasis on gains for the society as a whole through a centralized management of resources made planning a direct ideological challenge to individualism. In 1932 when vague talk of planning was winning much positive attention in a nation growing desperate for solutions, Rexford G. Tugwell—one of three Columbia professors who belonged to Roosevelt’s early “Brain Trust” and later assistant secretary of agriculture—warned that true planning would require “fundamental changes of attitude, new disciplines, revised legal structures, [and] uncustomed limitations on activity.” Because it would introduce “order and regularity” into economic life, planned production represented “the deadliest and most subtle enemy of speculative profit-making which could be devised.” When it was discovered that planning entailed “something not unlike an integrated group of enterprises run for its consumers rather than its owners,” Tugwell predicted, many giving lip service to the idea would dive for cover. They wanted only gains not sacrifice; yet any economic planning, as Tugwell saw it, had to restrict the advantages of those most privileged for the sake of a broader distribution of benefits. Tugwell and others who shared his attitudes toward planning did not seek government ownership of industry, but they did seek an economic reorganization that went well beyond what most Americans were ready for. Their ideas had a piecemeal influence on the New Deal, producing planning efforts in agriculture and in programs of limited scope such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, but they wanted far more sweeping changes in the thirties than they ever achieved.

A different conception of planning prevailed among other administrators and advisors in the New Deal camp. Raymond Moley, another member of the Brain Trust, wanted cooperation between government and business, with primary economic leadership left to business. Gerard Swope, the head of
General Electric and a progressive among businessmen, was enamored of trade associations and the idea of a national economic council that would produce a harvest of "studies" to bring greater economic predictability and security. The National Recovery Administration (NRA) directed by General Hugh Johnson offered a major opportunity for this kind of business-led planning. Under governmental auspices, each industry was supposed to construct a "code of fair competition" for itself in an atmosphere of cooperation that took into account the interests of labor and the public. The codes generally called for limiting production and raising prices, but what they often raised most effectively was the level of conflict between manufacturers and consumers, management and workers, large businesses and small, until the NRA was finally undone in 1935 by the Supreme Court, which objected to its broad delegation of legislative power. Nevertheless, the idea that government must cooperate with existing economic interests rather than attempt any basic restructuring remained of major importance to the New Deal.

Both Tugwell's notions of national planning and those that looked toward business accepted large-scale organization and giant corporations as permanent parts of a modern economy. In this they showed their sympathy with the side of progressive thought, associated in particular with Theodore Roosevelt's "New Nationalism" of 1912, that held that corporations had grown large through greater efficiency and that unfettered competition had become wasteful. A rival progressive tradition, linked especially with Louis Brandeis, who had exerted some influence on Woodrow Wilson, insisted that many large firms had gained their power not through economic superiority but by using unfair methods to destroy their rivals. Because concentrations of wealth and power were inherently dangerous, oligopoly and monopoly should be broken up to restore the possibility of fair competition, and Wall Street should be kept under necessary control. The Harvard Law School professor Felix Frankfurter, who later joined his friend Brandeis on the Supreme Court, sent a stream of his former students into the Roosevelt administration. The influence of this circle was felt particularly through the regulatory actions of the Securities and Exchange Commission, where the future Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas served, and in a vigorous antitrust campaign toward the end of the thirties that was cut off by World War II. Even so, the movement did little to slow industrial concentration.

Those who sought the breakup of overlarge corporations and strict securities regulation did not demand progress beyond individualism as the planners did; rather, they claimed to be its true defenders. Adam Smith had never dreamed of economic behemoths that could easily distort the relationships between independent units that were fundamental to his thought. The New Deal was working to restrain the corporate powers that were the real enemies of individualism, to restore the possibility of true economic competition and true opportunity, to encourage and sustain individual initiative. Such views, apparently so much at odds with the commitments of either the centralized or business planners, in fact existed side by side with them in the intellectual mélange of the New Deal. The different outlooks shared the conviction that the current economic and social arrangements required adjustment and the belief that government had to play an active role in bringing about change. Within any major program, each viewpoint could find expression in particular measures or through the control of specific agencies. The differences meant contradiction and conflict, a struggle over the definition of policies that went on throughout the decade. Yet lines were not always so sharply drawn nor issues so clear as it might seem.

During the 1980s reformers of various stripes looked upon the values of individualism with far more ambivalence than their sharper statements of position might suggest. Even within the context of trying to ensure a new level of support, protection, and security for Americans, they were more likely to debate how best to preserve individual initiative and responsibility than to discount these concerns altogether. In the same essay in which Charles Beard assailed the "individualist creed" and declared that to its loudest supporters it meant little more than "getting money," he also allowed that individualism would "always have its place in any reasoned scheme of thinking": "Individual initiative and energy are absolutely indispensable to the successful conduct of any enterprise, and there is ample ground for fearing the tyranny and ineptitude of governments." Many of those administering the New Deal held an even stronger sense than Beard that their policies must preserve individual responsibility and the dominance of private relationships in the economy.

The operations of the various programs of work relief put on display the contest between values going on in the minds of many New Dealers. Faced with massive depression unemployment, federal relief administrators tried to lift the stigma that had customarily been attached to joblessness. Most of the unemployed as they saw it were hardworking people caught up in a widespread economic collapse, not the intemperate or shiftless, as all too many were willing to imply. "They don't drink any more than the rest of us, they don't lie any more, they're no lazier than the rest of us," insisted the relief czar Harry Hopkins. Social workers — and the large majority of relief recipients, according to one poll — strongly preferred work relief over direct relief (money given without the expectation of work) because it presumably avoided the humiliation of accepting charity and allowed the worker to maintain a sense of dignity, ability, and self-worth. The means test requiring proof of absolute poverty before aid was granted was to be avoided, New Dealers argued (as it generally was in new federal programs before 1935); people needed to be given jobs that made use of their training and experience, not all with the same pay but at wages reflecting the work's value. People on relief would thus have predictable incomes that allowed independent choices about expenditures and a feeling of having earned their own way, escaping both the economic and psychological crippling that depression could bring.
Such ambitions for work relief, for all their generosity, contained an element of self-contradiction. They aspired to defend the traditional emphasis on individual responsibility as much as to escape its harsher implications. Relief administrators did not want the jobless to blame themselves for their unemployment or to feel inferior to those in the private workforce, but they accepted as a matter of principle that government projects should not compete with private businesses and that their ultimate goal was to see those on relief find jobs in the private economy once more. Thus, with work manufacturing any products that were being privately produced ruled out, many on work relief—61 percent in a Pennsylvania survey—could not in fact be given jobs that ran parallel to their usual vocations. And although hourly wages on some relief projects compared favorably with those in private industry, the number of hours worked and total income were strictly limited to ensure a clear incentive to seek private employment. Workers on relief were supposed to feel valuable and independent in their roles, yet they were also supposed to remain eager to change their status as soon as possible.26

The concern over maintaining individual initiative, responsibility, and dignity that informed New Deal thinking about work relief, and the commitment to upholding the primacy of private employment, illustrated the degree to which New Dealers accepted many of the values of individualism and the essential framework of American capitalism. But they erected beside these assumptions other convictions as well: that suffering was not to be denied or ignored; that human action could be effective in meeting human needs; that government at a national level had to assume a major responsibility for the welfare of its citizens; and that in a modern society individuals had only partial control over their fate. The lines between public and private would be blurred. Individualism as a system, under challenge for many decades, would concede strategic ground. Just as there would emerge in the wake of the New Deal a mixed economy inelegant and inconsistent in theory, there would be, behind national policy and in many American minds, an imperfect amalgam of values. Strains of individualism would remain very important in American culture, but new ideas would entwine themselves with the old.

A Mosaic of Power and Preference

Tensions over policy and values did not take form only on a national stage in the 1930s. The patterns of authority and belief that made up American political culture were often most evident below the national level, in reactions to the depression and to the sudden importance of federal programs in specific communities. Each of the multiple levels of government characteristic of the United States had something to say about what relief and reform would mean in practice, and strong traditions of states’ rights and local autonomy encouraged resistance to uniformity. New Dealers did not create policy in a vacuum, nor did they have the power to work their will on a pliant populace. Conservatives may have charged that the New Deal threatened dictatorship, and radicals that it was doing far too little to bring about fundamental change. Neither acknowledged sufficiently the obstacles placed before any single-minded exercise of power by political structure and tradition; neither calculated correctly the ballast provided by the weight of popular attitudes.

The question of who should make what decisions at what level of government is a longstanding one in American politics, and those seeking change must often choose whether to attempt a rearrangement in the pattern of decision-making or to work through existing channels of power. Even though the New Deal ultimately produced a substantial increase in federal authority, and even though it dealt a better political hand to a greater number of players, the Roosevelt administration did not set out to reorganize American politics. Rather, and with the inevitable exceptions, the New Deal shaped itself around the multilayered patchwork of governments, organizations, and interests that was the American political structure.

The sensitivity to political considerations within the Roosevelt administration was evident in the content of the Social Security Act of 1935. This act established not only the system of old-age insurance for which it is best known but also an unemployment insurance system and several programs to provide aid for dependent children and the disabled. Funds to support unemployment compensation were to be raised mainly through a federal payroll tax. Even so, the system was set up to allow each state to administer its own program. Thus, benefits varied from one area to another, reflecting the disposition and social aims of the several states, not any uniform national standard. A similar disparity developed within programs making direct federal grants to the states to assist them in helping the aging destitute, the crippled, and the blind, in supporting dependent children, and in improving public health services and maternity and infant care. Because these programs required matching funds that some states were willing or able to provide at higher levels than others, they reflected a spectrum of social values and conditions, not a common definition of societal responsibility. The room for variation and the preservation of local authority within the framework of federal-state cooperation left the unemployment and social welfare measures open to various criticisms; the same considerations made them far more acceptable politically than they would otherwise have been.

The system of old-age and survivors’ insurance established by the Social Security Act required contributions by workers themselves and by their employers, pulling money out of the depression-ridden economy of the thirties to build up a trust fund from which payments would not be made until 1942. It also left without coverage domestic workers and farm laborers, groups among the least able to save money for their own protection. Both weaknesses grew out of responses to the political circumstances of the period. Powerful agricultural interests did not want to require farmers to pay any tax on behalf of their workers, and southerners in particular opposed the inclusion
of domestics, the largest number of whom were African-American. Roosevelt acknowledged that employee taxes might not make the best sense economically, but he had good political reasons for supporting them as the basis for the social security system. He was convinced, as he had said in January 1931 while still governor of New York, that “our American aged do not want charity” but rather the benefits “to which they are rightfully entitled by their own thrift and foresight in the form of insurance.” A contributory plan would be in at least partial accord with individualistic values. Moreover, as Roosevelt later explained, the contributions convinced people that they had “a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions. . . . With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my social security program.”

The New Deal acknowledged that American ideas about state and local authority carried both political and cultural weight, and it sometimes built upon them, knowing the result would be uneven policy. Roosevelt was willing to place cultural logic before economic logic to root the social security system in a sense of earned rights consistent with traditional values. This attentiveness to public attitudes did not mean that there was no opposition to the bill. Some conservatives regarded any form of governmental insurance as unacceptable interference with individual initiative, and every Republican in the House but one voted to block social security legislation shortly before the measure was passed. They were not wrong to see significant change in the commitment to a national program that recognized, in contrast to most previous assumptions, a public responsibility for the well-being of individual citizens. That the changes came within, on top of, and beside what existed testified both to the assumptions of the New Dealers and to the persistence of entrenched beliefs and practice. Roosevelt and others knew the limitations of the system established in 1935, but they also knew their own political culture.

By the time the Social Security Act was passed, the Roosevelt administration had accumulated a substantial experience with the vagaries of state and local politics. Consider, for example, the federal relationship with cities. Before the 1930s the federal government had taken little direct interest in cities, and cities still battling for greater independence from state controls had no desire for national ties. The rising local relief costs and falling revenue of the early depression, however, had pushed many cities toward the financial brink by 1932, and urban leaders became increasingly convinced that only the federal government could amass resources equal to the economic challenge. Led by such mayors as Frank Murphy of Detroit—who had pushed local relief as far as it would go in a city dominated by the automobile boom in the twenties and the automobile depression in the thirties—urban officials began to lobby Washington for aid in 1932 and in February 1933 formed the U.S. Conference of Mayors to provide regular advocacy. Unable to overcome Hoover’s insistence on local responsibility, the activist mayors were heartened by the first streams of New Deal aid. The Civil Works Administration (CWA) in 1933–34, the Public Works Administration (PWA) under the direction of Harold Ickes, and after 1935 the Works Progress Administration (WPA), led by Harry Hopkins, poured large sums into the cities for the support of major construction projects and work relief. These are the generalizations. Yet they tell only part of the story, for what the New Deal meant in any specific place was strongly shaped by the local environment.

That environment might have included any of a variety of obstacles to unified and consistent policy. State Democratic parties, far from working as parts of any smooth national organization, were often less reform-minded than the New Dealers, were sometimes split into factions, and frequently were interested more in patronage than in issues of governance. State-city relationships reflected not only political conflicts—especially when legislature and city were controlled by opposing parties—but also major cultural tensions. Rural areas were often vastly overrepresented in the legislatures (as they would be until after the one-person/one-vote Supreme Court decisions of the 1960s) and made no secret of their distrust toward cities. Several states put strict limits on the power of cities to tax or borrow money, and when these limits were reached under the pressure of depression, some jurisdictions lost federal grants they desperately needed because they could not raise the funds for a matching share. Ethnic tensions also played a part, as when the Massachusetts legislature used a debt limit to obstruct the Irish machine running Boston. No pleas of emergency were strong enough to overcome existing political and cultural divisions for long.

The conditions in different cities and the attitudes of the people running them also varied widely. Kansas City was exceptional because it handled the depression unusually well on its own. The Democratic boss Tom Pendergast and his city manager initiated a community “Ten-Year Plan” involving some $50 million in public works, and the Pendergast machine (with the aid of the county judge Harry S Truman) orchestrated a campaign that led to the plan’s acceptance by a huge margin in a 1931 vote. Kansas City’s relief programs, which provided thousands of construction jobs in part by using human power instead of machinery, helped keep suffering and business failure to a minimum. In cities at the other extreme, officials did as little as possible to aid the unemployed, objected to federal aid, or obstructed New Deal programs when they arrived. The Republican mayors of Denver and Syracuse in 1932 resisted seeking help from the national government on the grounds of fiscal conservatism and fear of federal dictatorship. The Democratic mayor of Richmond commented proudly that cities should simply live with the revenues they had. And the Pittsburgh mayor, who had won election as a New Deal candidate, nevertheless blocked development of the WPA in that city, vetoed a bond issue to aid the needy, and attacked Roosevelt’s relief efforts as “wholesale bribery of the electorate.”

Many cities also tried to reshape New Deal programs to fit the biases of existing distributions of power and to protect local habits and prerogatives. Charles Trout in his analysis of Boston and Jo Ann Argersinger in her study
of Baltimore detail the process of what Trout labels the “localization of federal programs.” Especially after WPA guidelines returned more control over the distribution of relief to local authorities in 1935, federally financed jobs in these cities were more likely to be handed out with an eye to ethnicity, race, and class than with a strict adherence to Roosevelt’s nondiscrimination order. In Boston at the end of the decade, Italians from the North End were receiving at least 40 percent fewer than the number of WPA jobs they should have had according to their rate of unemployment, and African-Americans 13 percent fewer, while South Boston’s Irish received 14 percent more than their proportionate share. Baltimore’s Catholics accounted for 24 percent of relief recipients but claimed over 50 percent of CWA jobs, while blacks, with 42 percent of those eligible, got only 28 percent of the jobs (and even this proportion brought complaints from state legislators). Women, meanwhile, who made up 20 percent of the relief load, received only 0.4 percent of CWA jobs. The Baltimore Sun supported city officials who objected to work projects without clear long-term benefits, and the mayor agreed with the state planning commission that relief for “common laborers” was not in the public interest. In Boston the political obstacles to the New Deal included “habits of Yankee thrift (‘pay-as-you-go government,’ it was called), a swarm of overextended taxpayers, . . . businessmen accustomed to laissez-faire[,] . . . a conservative Catholic hierarchy and a number of cautious, parochial trade unions,” not to mention a city council dominated by “worshippers” of Al Smith. In both Boston and Baltimore, just as the New Deal changed the city, it was in turn changed by it.13

Despite the determined resistance to outside authority in some municipalities, city officials were often two minds about the New Deal. Many recognized a need for continuing federal involvement in the cities yet did not want to let go of familiar biases and assumptions. Local groups reacted to specific New Deal programs in related ways. They, too, harbored divided feelings, embracing federal programs that benefited their own interests directly while remaining suspicious of governmental aid to other groups. There was always a good reason why one’s own group had a special claim to attention consistent with virtuous effort and self-reliance, and why other people should show more initiative and responsibility. The New Deal pleased enough of the people enough of the time to win large electoral majorities, even in cities like Baltimore and Boston. But this support did not indicate that in endorsing new measures voters felt compelled to give up either particularist or individualist attitudes.

In smaller cities and towns the compromises reached and the contradictions created were similar in spirit if not always in detail. Robert and Helen Lynd, who had conducted a detailed sociological study of Muncie, Indiana, in 1925 for their book Middletown (1929), returned to Muncie in 1935 to see what had changed, publishing the results as Middletown in Transition (1937). The Lynds recorded struggles between bankers, the city council, and local grocers over control of food contracts for relief that mirrored the conflicts over ideas, and equaled the self-seeking, of any metropolis. They noted the seeming paradox that a Middletown physically stagnant during the prosperous 1920s was improving its facilities markedly in the midst of depression, thanks to federal work projects. And they reflected on the tensions between values that public relief measures brought out in the community. People recognized that immediate needs demanded the expenditure of public funds to mitigate the condition of the jobless, but they were uncomfortable with such aid. They assumed that the process would be dogged by corruption (which was often taken for granted in local politics), and they remained attached to the values of individual responsibility and private charity. Even so, given that large-scale relief measures were necessary, people wanted them managed with efficiency, which implied granting someone central authority, risking loss of local control, and leaving behind the sense of personal responsiveness. New Deal work relief meant living with contradiction.

The Lynds suggested that in Middletown many people had awakened during the depression “from a sense of being at home in a familiar world to the shock of living as an atom in a universe dangerously too big and blindly out of hand.” They pointed further to several dislocations and pressures of the period that were “peculiarly conducive to cultural change.” Yet the Lynds found in the people of Middletown no tendency to blame their community structure or the national system, and a strong affection for familiar verities. A defensive resentment, among those in the “business class,” of increased federal authority, labor activism, and radical ideas, combined with “tenuous and confused new positive values” among workers inspired by New Deal relief and labor policies, seemed to suggest a slight sharpening of ideological lines. But the Lynds found little evidence of class awareness or radical intent.14

Scholarly reexamination of two surveys taken in 1939 has provided support for such observations. By far the largest number of respondents to the surveys identified themselves as middle-class, a common result in the United States but significant in a decade of depression. Those who labeled themselves working-class and who believed that labor and management interests were opposed to one another—a group defined in the process of analysis as the “fully class conscious”—amounted only to about 3.4 percent of the white, nonfarm workforce. In all groups the prevalent attitudes toward work seemed to reflect individualistic assumptions. The investigators found, for example, that about 70 percent of the wage workers surveyed would have liked to be self-employed, and despite the frequent association of a preference for security over risk with the depression experience and with the structure of modern corporate industry, two-thirds of the workers put a higher value on advancement opportunities in a job than on job security. A substantial majority of those surveyed also remained optimistic, believing that the future still held out good opportunities for them and for their children.15

Perhaps these responses might prompt a reminder that at any given point during the depression a considerable majority of the workforce was employed.
Yet particular fates cannot explain the replies, nor do the surveys suggest that Americans were either unaffected by the depression or unthinking. The attitudes of respondents in all groups toward the issues of government assistance and self-help were more mixed than monolithic. If majorities expressed individualistic work values, majorities also endorsed federal relief and the idea that "the government should see that everyone is above subsistence." A slimmer majority supported government regulation of utilities (which the New Deal had extended), but government ownership of the railroads or the telephone system was solidly rejected, as was redistribution of wealth through taxes or a law limiting excess income. The unemployed and the small group of "fully class conscious" workers were more likely to support radical measures if such steps were necessary to guarantee adequate relief. Yet a majority of the "class conscious" group preferred self-employment (with its capitalist potential) over work for others and valued opportunity for advancement over job security. And the unemployed, though less optimistic about their own prospects, were nearly as hopeful as other groups about opportunities for their children.

These results may be subject to various qualifications. Attitudes can vary somewhat over time, and all polls or surveys have their biases and margins for error. People do not always act in accord with the values or preferences they express. Whatever the majority believes, even a rather small minority of the population can sustain a substantial organization or exert a good deal of political pressure under the right circumstances. Specific national and local issues in the thirties evoked struggle and debate that general attitudinal alignments could not resolve. Nevertheless, allowing for all such considerations, these surveys suggest that a balancing of attitudes pervaded the political culture of the 1930s and established the boundaries for reform. The clear majority seemed to want an expansion of federal responsibility within a framework that would preserve individual opportunity and responsibility—change, that is, that would not interfere too much with the familiar.

Questions of identity, values, and attitudes can be approached in other ways as well. One analysis of working-class political behavior from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s argues that "pockets of class sentiment" had long existed and that during the depression, this sentiment was "translated into political consciousness as the class basis of partisanship became successively more marked from election to election." Workers were mobilized politically as never before, and class differentiation between parties in American voting was on its way toward reaching (for a time) levels equal to those in Europe. Yet the striking fact in the United States was that this worker mobilization came about through the Democratic party, which remained "a cross-class coalition of ideologically contradictory elements." Indeed, the "ideological implications" of workers' cultures, traditions, and priorities were inherently "ambiguous," and the commitments that might flow from political mobilization were highly contingent. The same analysis that points toward a greater consciousness of class and a more acute sharpening of ideological pol-

itics during the 1930s than was evident in contemporary surveys tends to reinforce the picture of people and groups juggling competing values within themselves and responsive to varying forms of public expression.55

Students of labor activism approach similar conclusions from a different angle. Militance did not equal radicalism. Radical political parties provided labor organizers who were sometimes of considerable importance within specific local circumstances, and groups of workers might at times feel strongly the appeal of the left. Yet radicals did not control the labor movement. In assessing the influence of the Communist party on autoworkers' unions, for example, Roger Keenan has argued that Communists influenced immediate questions of attitude and action, that they provided an early source of trade union experience, and that a few managed to have a disproportionate effect. Yet he concludes that ultimately "Communist influence . . . was superficial and fragile."57 In evaluating the period as a whole, Robert Zieger offers a striking picture of an assertiveness that found expression primarily within the existing economic and political system rather than against it:

Throughout the decade workers were uncommonly militant. They resisted further erosion of their standards and struggled to create and sustain organizations to buttress their position and safeguard their working conditions and pay packets. They made clear political choices, voting in heavy numbers and casting their ballots for Franklin D. Roosevelt and politicians closely identified with his policies. They showed little interest in radical parties or unions, and they overwhelmingly avoided extremism.58

Commentators on the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal have found no shortage of lapses, inadequacies, and failures. Some have complained that the New Deal did too much, most that it did too little. Although the standards of judgment have changed over time as the concerns of each generation have reshaped perceptions of the past, assertions of what the New Deal failed to achieve have often reflected a belief that it did not go far enough in a particular direction, that it did not commit itself thoroughly to a particular idea or strategy, that it did not build a cohesive reform movement or structure a unified policy of systematic change. Yet many who have undertaken such critiques have also felt compelled to acknowledge that the New Deal, for all its faults, was undeniably a psychological success, generating strong popular support and transforming the mood of the decade. Perhaps it is time to recognize that its weakness may also have been its strength, that the contradictions within the New Deal may have been a source of its appeal. American culture as a whole was filled with "ideologically contradictory elements," and it was no political mistake that the Democratic party embodied such contradictions. People of varying social circumstances were struggling with the tensions between individualist values and public needs, local control and local
dependence, personalized responses and institutional efficiencies. In their collective tolerance for inconsistency, in their efforts to balance competing values, claims, and ideas, New Deal programs created channels of political expression for the thought and culture of the decade that earned them their “psychological” success.

three

Popular Culture and the Dance of Values

Reeling from the depression’s onslaught in 1931, the producer Cecil B. DeMille took up the bold shield of individualistic moralism to declare the troubles of the film industry a “test of courage.” Proclaiming that those who could stand only “pleasant times and pleasant words” were not of “lasting value,” he proceeded, in the style of Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon, to find positive good in the economic collapse and reason for a perverse optimism. “This year will be a splendid year for the industry,” DeMille averred, “for during it we will see much of the purging effect of that greatest of all natural laws: the survival of the fittest.” The laxities and inefficiencies encouraged by prosperity were impurities that had to be cleansed; the virtues of unremitting work, and thrift, and discipline, had occasionally to be tempered anew in the fires of competition.

In May 1933 Walt Disney’s The Three Little Pigs first appeared in theaters, and the popularity of the short cartoon quickly outstripped Disney’s ability to supply copies. Eventually, it became the most widely shown film of the year and earned Disney his first Academy Award. In the familiar tale it tells, two sprightly porkers throw together houses of straw and sticks so that they can “play around all day,” only to find themselves in dire straits when they confront the physical and economic peril of the wolf at the door. The third pig—proclaiming righteously that he has “no chance to sing and dance, for work and play don’t mix”—builds his house laboriously of brick and stone, protecting himself from danger and ultimately providing a haven for the others as well. It is easy to conclude that there was a transparent moral message in the film endorsing the traditional virtues of work, discipline, and self-denial, a message it is tempting to link to Disney’s conservative political views.