

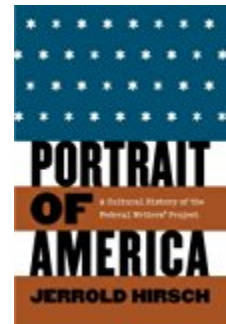
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Jerrold Hirsch.** *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xii + 293 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5489-1; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2817-5.

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## The Road to Integrative Liberalism

Decades are handy guides for historians. The Roaring 20s, the Depression Decade, the 60s, and so on; the list is endless. Now, Jerrold Hirsch, Professor of History at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, has provided an insightful guide to the United States's quest for an integrative liberalism. Professor Hirsch does not use the term, but the concept is ever present in his narrative. Integrative liberalism is the third part of the trinity of modernism: liberty, equality, fraternity. In American terms, it means the attempt by democratic-progressive reformers to use the state (that is, the national government) to correct the abuses of the market which laissez-faire liberalism had permitted. At the same time defining liberty and equality for an urban-industrial society, these reformers discovered that U.S. cultural history is very important. The philosophical assumption was that the people were the source or driving force in recovering and understanding the organized past (that is, history). *Bound For Glory: America in Color, 1939-1943*, recently published by the Library of Congress from its collection of photographs from the Farm Security Administration and the War of Information, is a pictorial example of this concept. I think that Hirsch would not object to my use of the concept in reviewing his informative book.

Hirsch's concepts are cultural pluralism as historically combined with romantic nationalism, the most potent concept from the nineteenth century. He is correct to use those concepts borrowed from early transcendentalists and later progressives of the twentieth century. From Ralph Waldo Emerson to Horace Kallen to Franz

Boas, the emphasis was on diversity. The move was from ethnic nationalism to civic nationalism. "Whiteness" or racial labeling was not acceptable to the leaders of the Federal Writers Project. But as Hirsch discusses in chapter 7, "The People Must Be Heard: W. T. Crouch and the Southern Life History Program," the historical experience and current presence in the south was a vexing issue for many writers of the guidebooks. All the old nonsense about blacks, as slaves or free, was brought out or invoked and was rejected by the editors. Other ethnic groups in other state guidebooks did not generate concern because of the centrality of the Negro in the First Republic, 1789-1865.

In chapter 5, "Long Live Participation!: Ethnicity, Race, and the Federal Writers' Project," Hirsch again notes how the role of ethnicity influenced the presentation of history in a state. The issue was explosive in the 1930s. In Germany, cultural nationalism was reactionary and racist. In the United States, diversity was a virtue, a means to national vitality. Carl Sandburg's poetry and his romantic treatment of Lincoln were products of this philosophy. Hirsch's text supports the conclusions of Charles Alexander's *Here the Country Lies* (1980) and Richard Pells' *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (1973) that romantic nationalism was a vital element in nation-building.

The American Guide Series was major a element of the Federal Writers' Project. The books combined essays, which often drew criticism as being left-wing or pro-New

Deal, and guides to the sights and historical sites available in each state. Today they “are cultural artifacts of the 1930s, embodying cultural visions and dreams of their time.” (p. 42). The major dream was a united America, inclusive of all ethnic groups. The guidebooks were designed around essays, general descriptions of the state’s major cities, and automobile tours. Hoping to answer the reader’s questions, the books were flexible. They allowed the “reader to approach travel as a chance for personal growth and discovery,” particularly in the direction of what it meant to be an American citizen (p. 53).

Integrative liberalism was an optimistic belief, because in supporting progress (material and moral improvement), diversity became unity. The Great Depression was just a brief upset on the road—a flat tire as it were. As Hirsch makes clear in his text, this attitude was vital for economic recovery. While other industrial nations were embracing some form of totalitarianism, the United States accepted the leadership of a wheel-chair-bound, landed aristocrat from upstate New York. Fear was the enemy. It would be turned back by American optimism.

Every citizen had a role to perform in the creation of an integrative republic. The literary artist had a particular obligation to articulate a vision that revealed to all the special nature of the United States. The writer was a critical part of this enterprise, recalling the unique contributions of all the states and peoples in this united republic. All of these issues and factors were present in Beaufort, South Carolina. The community was of interest to this reviewer because it is the hometown of Leon H. Keyserling, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers during the Truman presidency. And Keyserling was an integrative liberal all of his life. Having completed a biography of him, I was interested in Hirsch’s comments about Beaufort. He did not disappoint. The village wanted to be progressive, modern, and yet hold on to the traditional ways of segregation and racial thinking. The big concern was how the federal programs might “corrupt our Negroes.” The issues were fought over how the Negroes would be characterized in slavery and in the hard times of the Great Depression.

Martin Dies and similar politicians used this fear of

change to damn the New Deal as “Red to the core.” Conservatives in both parties distrusted the New Deal; after all, it encouraged blacks, organized labor, intellectuals, etc., to “get above their raisin’.” World War II and the later civil rights movement continued the quest for an integrative nation. But since the 1960s and the rise of the Right in the Republican Party, the prospect for an integrative nation is not encouraging. The demise of integrative liberalism is not the focus of this review. Maybe because *Portrait of America* is cultural history, the political opposition is not as well developed as it might have been. But this observation is a minor point.

Hirsch has written an important account of New Deal liberalism. Of course, the issue of what to include and what to omit is important, but to comment in any degree on that situation is to suggest that Hirsch should have written a different book from the one he produced. One last point and a minor criticism can be offered. As James Patterson, Alan Brinkley, and other historians have noted, the coming of World War II meant vast and significant change in American institutions. That being so, Hirsch’s last paragraph is both a conclusion and a beginning of his cultural history. It is suggestive of how integrative liberalism came to a fork in the road and “took it,” as the joke says.

“An examination of how the Writers’ Program sought to create a place for itself in an administration turning from national affairs to international conflict, from reform at home to war abroad, can help illuminate how the cultural component of the New Deal’s reform program adapted to the war effort. In the process, one can see how a liberal and reformist view of American culture was transformed into the basis of a new and ultimately conservative national consensus” (p. 212).

Wars, hot or cold, are hard on roads. I look forward to Professor Hirsch’s next book.

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