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978-0-521-71535-5 - Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939:

Second Edition

Lizabeth Cohen

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Making a New Deal

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This book examines how it was possible and what it meant for ordinary factory workers to become effective unionists and national political participants by the mid-1930s. Lizabeth Cohen follows Chicago workers as they make choices about whether to attend ethnic benefit society meetings or go to the movies, whether to shop in local neighborhood stores or patronize the new A&P. Although workers may not have been political in traditional terms during the Twenties, as they made daily decisions like these, they declared their loyalty in ways that would ultimately have political significance. As the depression worsened in the 1930s, not only did workers find their pay and working hours cut or eliminated, but the survival strategies they had developed during the 1920s were undermined. Looking elsewhere for help, workers adopted new ideological perspectives and overcame longstanding divisions among themselves to mount new kinds of collective action. Chicago workers' experiences as citizens, ethnics and blacks, wage earners and consumers all converged to make them into New Deal Democrats and CIO unionists.

First printed in 1990, *Making a New Deal* has become an established classic in American history. This second edition includes a new preface by the author.

Lizabeth Cohen is the Howard Mumford Jones Professor of American Studies in the history department of Harvard University. She is also the author of *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003) and coauthor, with David M. Kennedy, of *The American Pageant*, a college-level U.S. history textbook.

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*Industrial Workers in Chicago,
1919–1939*

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LIZABETH COHEN

Harvard University



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In memory of my mother
And for my father and Herrick

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Acknowledgments

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the length of this book, that was no simple task. Herrick Chapman, Frank Couvares, Gary Gerstle, Jim Grossman, Alice Kessler-Harris, Marjorie Murphy, Roy Rosenzweig, and Joe Trotter have all helped make this a better book. Over the years, many others have read and commented on specific chapters, which I have also appreciated. They include Ross Boylan, Sue Cobble, Kathy Conzen, Drew Faust, Mary Felstiner, Susan Glenn, Jim Gregory, Margo Horn, Becky Hyman, Mike Kazin, Ann Durkin Keating, Roland Marchand, Peggy Pascoe, Steve Ross, Debora Silverman, Judith Stein, Kat Weinert, Gavin Wright, and other members of the Berkeley Americanists Group and the Stanford Dissertation Writing Group. I have benefited as well from discussions of chapters presented to Gavin Wright and Paul David's Social Science Seminar at Stanford University in 1986, the Working-Class History Seminar of the Pittsburgh Center for Social History in 1987, and the Urban History Seminar at the Chicago Historical Society and the Chicago Area Labor History Seminar of the Newberry Library in 1988. I have not been able to deal adequately with all the criticisms and suggestions I have received over the years, but I hope these colleagues will recognize the ways that they have improved my book.

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with me. Finally, I owe the greatest appreciation to the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for the book. As they gave me their memories, they truly brought this story to life.

Hunting down sources for this book took me to many places outside of Chicago. In New York, I received important help from Anna Marie Sandeck at the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Company Archives and Susan Werner, Editor of *True Story* magazine, at Macfadden Publications. At the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz shared their own research into the early history of the United Packinghouse Workers of America, including the wonderful interviews they did with former packinghouse workers. At the Labor Archives of Pennsylvania State University, Peter Gottlieb helped me weed through the voluminous archives of the United Steel Workers of America and identify sources relevant to the early history of steel organizing in Chicago. At the National Archives, I found all the curators I dealt with to be courteous and helpful, but I must single out Jerry Hess for his unusual willingness to mine the government records under his jurisdiction for sources that would help me and, I am sure, so many other researchers. The hospitality of Ann Billingsley and Jim Grossman, Suzanne Desan, Debby Leff, and Jerome Leonard made research trips to Chicago, Madison, and Washington, D.C., both fruitful and enjoyable.

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journal for granting permission for its use. Finally, I cannot imagine a better editor than Frank Smith of Cambridge University Press. He read the manuscript with intelligence and care and was willing to give me all kinds of advice without forcing me to take any of it. Also at the press, Russell Hahn saw the book through production with consummate skill.

Members of my family have sustained me both emotionally and, at times, financially, over the seven years that I have been at work on this book. As different as their own work lives are from my own, they have never wavered in believing I was doing something worthwhile. They have brought love and empathy to every step of the way that they have shared with me. My only sorrow as I complete this project is that neither my mother, Dorothy Rodbell Cohen, nor my mother-in-law, Katharine Eaton Leonard, both of whom cared so deeply about history and would have rejoiced at the publication of this book, are alive to celebrate with me. Nonetheless, I know that I owe much of this book to my mother. Her own political awakening took place during the 1930s, and she raised me on stories about the CIO, FDR, and the New Deal. Her social commitment and intellectual engagement are now, I hope, a part of me. In the three years that I have been transforming this project from a dissertation to a book, my life has been unalterably changed by becoming a mother myself. Although my two daughters Julia and Natalie may often have felt that this book was a third sibling to rival, the pleasure that they have brought to my life has made these happy, if not calm, years. Vicky Byrne, who helped to care for them, is probably more responsible than anyone for my ability to finish this book. I have left for last the person who has been my partner in every aspect of life during the more than fifteen years we have shared together. To Herrick, who has given me so much of himself, I give this book with all my love.

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Preface to the Second Edition

As I set out to introduce a new generation of readers to *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939*, I am struck by how different the United States is today from the era I sought to explain in this book. The New Deal and the American-style welfare state it spawned are no longer even the pride of the Democrats who built it, although demands that the government provide for an adequate minimum wage, basic retirement pay, and a safety net of health insurance persist. The unions whose formation I celebrated are ever declining in membership and stature, their calls for what I had labeled “moral capitalism” and a “culture of unity” in the 1930s sounding increasingly like cries in the night, with today’s growing income disparities and ambivalence toward immigrants. Employees now worry less about the social welfare commitments of their employers, and more about whether or not they still have a job. The chain movie theaters and stores and the network radio that once triumphed over independent, often ethnic-owned, alternatives are themselves floundering with continued concentration in retail and competition from the Internet and DVDs. And industrial cities like Chicago, the physical setting for my story, are now part of complex metropolitan areas with downtowns that are either gentrified or hollowed out and socioeconomically segmented suburbs that function as urban neighborhoods once did to differentiate residents along class, racial, and ethnic lines, though often with borders even more impenetrable.

These changes over the last seventy-five years make it all that much more important to me that *Making a New Deal* continue to attract readers. As

I would like to thank Ann Wilson for her exemplary research assistance with this new preface and Herrick Chapman for his continued interest in *Making a New Deal*, even eighteen years later.

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with all works of history, it can, without necessarily intending to, teach us about the relativity of our own times, that things can be different from the way they are today and, somewhat paradoxically, that today somehow evolved out of yesterday. So I invite readers to join me in revisiting interwar Chicago, where factory workers in the 1930s embraced two new institutions in their lives: a national Democratic Party engaged in creating a more powerful federal government in Washington and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which managed for the first time to organize working-class Americans in successful, national-level industrial unions after many failed efforts, most notably the massive strikes of 1919. My investigation begins with that labor defeat after World War I. I argue that one cannot fully understand workers' mobilization in the 1930s without comprehending the multiple changes that workers underwent during the 1920s and the early years of the Great Depression in their family, work, leisure, and associational lives; in their neighborhood stores, theaters, and churches; and in their patterns of saving, spending, and dependence.

Just as the actions of the workers who are the protagonists of this book resulted from myriad – some powerful, others subtle – influences on their consciousnesses, so my writing of *Making a New Deal* grew out of a particular moment in time in historical scholarship. I began this project in 1982 as my dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, completing it in 1986. Four years later, in 1990, it appeared as a book. My work over these eight years of *Making a New Deal's* gestation reflected trends in the field while also, I would like to think, pushing them in some new directions. Upon entering graduate school in the fall of 1978, I quickly came under the spell of the new social history that had wafted through the profession since the mid-1960s with the first community studies and explorations of “history from the bottom up.” Excavating the past lives of ordinary people seemed to be the holy work awaiting my generation of historians, handed down from the small circle of crusaders who had showed us the way.¹ Totally devoted to social history, I made three other

¹ Many of the pioneering works of social history that I remember reading in graduate school focused on the colonial period: Jessie Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (July 1968): 371–407; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736* (New York: Norton, 1970). The nineteenth century was becoming increasingly important for social history during the 1970s, with such influential studies as Stephen Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress:*

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commitments in setting out the criteria for my choice of a dissertation topic in 1982.

First, although my interests ranged over nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States history, I was struck by how little social analysis had penetrated historical writing about the twentieth century. As amazing as it may seem today with so much dynamic work published and underway on twentieth-century history, most of the literature then focused around decades – “the Twenties,” “the Thirties” – or even more narrowly, presidential administrations. Bringing the sensibilities and methodologies of social-historical investigation of early American communities and industrializing America to more modern U.S. history excited me.

Second, as social history had flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s, it had spawned fertile subfields such as labor history, immigration history, black history, and women’s history. By the early 1980s, however, these subfields seemed to me to have developed into isolated ghettos and in some cases even fiefdoms, guarded by towering senior scholars defending newly established but already sacrosanct canons. With an interest in writing about working-class Americans in the twentieth century, I envisioned myself needing to engage with all of those subfields, as my subjects would have been shaped by their multiple identities as workers; as immigrants; as black, brown, or white; and as men or women. So I hoped to cross over historiographical boundaries in my project and thereby restore some wholeness to the fragmented lives that historians’ narrowly focused attentions had inadvertently created.

Finally, just as I was readying myself to launch my dissertation in social history, social history itself came under attack from scholars who lamented how it was developing. The basic critique, which made sense to me despite its often polemical presentation, revolved around the avoidance of politics in much social-historical analysis. Despite ambitious goals and powerful tools aimed at uncovering the experiences of ordinary Americans, the argument went, social historians had failed to probe sufficiently people’s

Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); Herbert George Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

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political thoughts and behavior and, even more disturbing, to link their social lives to larger questions of politics and power in the United States. As Tony Judt put it in one of the most controversial of the attacks, the tendency to write a “history with the politics left out,” “the obsession with structures and demography, with what people ate and how many chairs they owned,” “the mindless scraping of the historical dustbin” (just to recall his spicy rhetoric) deprived people in the past of also having a “political and ideological identity.” “To the extent that politics concerns the ordering and preservation of power,” Judt asserted, “it affected the seventeenth-century peasant no less than the nineteenth-century burgher.” Relatedly, at just about the time I was conceptualizing my thesis, some leading social scientists were urging their own ranks, whose work on industrialization and social structure had greatly influenced social historians, to “bring the state back in,” in the language of an important 1982 conference and eventual book.² They too called for greater attention to politics and political structure. I took from these debates a challenge to bring the rich, multivocal research of social history more effectively to bear on the political history of the twentieth century. I wasn’t willing to say that the daily content of people’s social and cultural lives didn’t matter, only that we had to do a better job of figuring out *how* it mattered in shaping major developments in politics and power. I was determined to write a politically inflected social history or a socially inflected political history or, better yet, to abandon those distinctions altogether.

This call to put politics back into social history inspired my choice of a historical problem to pursue in my dissertation. I decided to identify a moment when working-class people had acted politically in new ways and then to explore, looking through the lens of the social historian, how their prior social, political, and cultural experiences might help explain their new political ideologies and behavior. The 1930s – when ordinary working Americans helped build a broader-based national Democratic Party that concentrated more power in the federal government and a successful industrial union movement that bargained collectively with employers – emerged as a prime candidate. Furthermore, focusing on the 1920s and 1930s would allow me to investigate more modern cultural experience

² Tony Judt, “A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians,” *History Workshop Journal* #7 (1979), pp. 68, 71, 72, 88; Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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than was common in most social histories, focused as they were on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a former museum curator of material culture, I had already published an essay on how recent immigrants to the United States during the Progressive era, many of them from peasant backgrounds, had reacted to the mass-produced furnishings and goods that seemed so plentiful in this country.³ In the early 1980s, the historical study of mass culture and mass consumption was in its infancy. Interpretations derived crudely from Karl Marx's concept of superstructure, the Frankfurt School's suspicions of mass culture as fascist manipulation, or even Antonio Gramsci's more nuanced notion of hegemony uncontroversially held sway, supporting the assumption that mass culture was by definition homogenizing, depoliticizing, and ultimately a tool of the ruling class to control the masses. With a commitment to giving my working-class protagonists as much agency as possible, I was at least determined to investigate their responses to mass culture rather than blindly adopt the party line.⁴

Having honed in on the question of how people's social, political, and cultural experiences during the 1920s and 1930s may have influenced their new political actions during the New Deal era, I was then faced with figuring out how to set up the project. Many of the classic works of social history had been community studies – of isolated New England towns and one-industry cities like Lynn and Lowell. Having shifted to the twentieth-century United States, with its more national economy and culture, I at first assumed that the community study approach would not work. Hence I embarked on a research design comparing workers' experiences in five cities, each with a distinctive political economy. While working up this plan, I attended the month-long quantitative history workshop offered annually by Chicago's Newberry Library, thinking it would help me interpret data comparing cities and illuminating such things as workers' standard of living, race and ethnicity, and employment patterns. The big discovery for me, however, was not the virtues of quantitative history but rather the eye-popping possibilities of Chicago as a research site. In this city I had never before visited I found rich veins of social history

³ Lizabeth Cohen, "Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the Material Culture of American Working-Class Homes, 1885–1915," *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Winter 1980): 752–75.

⁴ The classic work on mass consumption in the United States at the time was Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

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sources to mine. (See page 7 for more detail.) And as I learned more about the city, abandoning computer card punching and lectures on multivariate analysis whenever possible to walk its streets and explore its archives and libraries, I realized that not only would a focus on Chicago allow me to capture a population and follow it over time and across various dimensions of lived experience, but a city as vast and complex as this one offered the possibility of making illuminating comparisons within its own borders.

As you will see, this comparative approach – in particular my ability to differentiate between Chicago workers who embraced the CIO and those who resisted it – underlies my method. It gradually became clear to me that the key analytical comparisons would not be visible by contrasting five diverse cities; overall, this story of the 1930s was a national one. Where communities of workers differed in their responses, more small-scale variations – created by the labor policies of particular employers or the persistent isolation of workers' own ethnic and racial enclaves – were responsible. As I reread *Making a New Deal* in preparation for writing this new preface, I was once again convinced of the value of digging deeply into local sources and thereby following people from their homes and neighborhoods to their workplaces and leisure spots and on to their union halls and voting booths.

A final point about my choice of dissertation topic. Surely I was also influenced by the times in which I lived. The years from 1982 to 1990 were the heyday of Reaganism. In an outright rejection of New Deal statism, the Reagan administration advocated the deregulation, privatization, and overall shrinking of government and its responsibilities and famously dealt a crippling blow to organized labor when it broke the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981. What was most disturbing to me and other political progressives was that a surprising number of white, working-class Americans were joining the ranks of what were dubbed "Reagan Democrats," convinced that the Republican Party, no longer the Democratic one, espoused policies that best served their interests. They saw the Democrats as championing the very poor, the unemployed, and particularly African Americans, at their expense. Although I am not sure how aware I was at the time, in retrospect I realize that in writing *Making a New Deal* I was showcasing a time when working people valued the benefits of a strong, centralized government and collective action by organized labor and allied across class, racial, and ethnic lines to secure both. In a sense, I was reminding myself and my readers that circumstances had

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been different once, and could be again, and that the rifts of the present were not inevitable. Recognizing this variation over time must have made me wonder how and why the mind-sets of Americans had altered so dramatically between the 1930s and the 1980s, and I can see now that this question propelled me into my next book, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*.⁵

In many ways, *A Consumers' Republic* grew out of *Making a New Deal*. In the first book, I had argued that mass culture and mass consumption in the 1920s had kept workers tied to, rather than unmooring them from, their ethnic and working-class communities and then, in the 1930s, had helped them build influential class-based political institutions like labor unions. My arguments ran against the accepted wisdom that the flourishing of mass culture in the 1920s had integrated Americans into a depoliticized, mainstream middle-class culture. But as I ended my story in 1939, on the eve of world war and a half dozen years before the arrival of the full-blown, exceptionally prosperous mass consumer society that would follow it, I wondered how things might have changed soon thereafter. Did blue- and white-collar Americans' identities and experience finally converge, as workers' toe-hold in mass consumption during the interwar era became a firmer foothold after World War II, potentially promising greater class amalgamation along with a greater share of consumer goods? How might the decline of urban ethnic and working-class neighborhoods, often organized around a factory or mill, and their replacement by suburban towns with few connections to employment affect working Americans' loyalty to bosses, unions, and comrades? Did mass consumption in the postwar era continue to support political action, or did it stifle it? What kinds of attitudes toward government did people espouse in these prosperous postwar decades, and did their market relations play any formative role? These and other queries drove my research for *A Consumers' Republic*. I will leave my actual findings to readers of that book, but it should be clear that the questions I asked in writing *Making a New Deal* continued to set an agenda for my future work. It turned out that *A Consumers' Republic* reinforced the theoretical premise of *Making a New Deal* that mass consumption and mass culture have no intrinsic political significance; the context in which products were produced and consumed critically shaped their larger impact.

⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

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In the eighteen years since *Making a New Deal* was published, other historians have undertaken research and analysis on topics central to my arguments. Their findings have expanded our knowledge about the interwar period and deepened – in a few cases, contradicted – what I originally claimed. The publication of this new edition provides me with an ideal opportunity to review the most relevant work and assess its implications. Hence, I will now turn to considering five themes that stood at the heart of *Making a New Deal* and have continued to attract scholars: the significance of mass consumption, the nature of ethnic and racial identity, the social underpinnings of civic engagement, the fate of welfare capitalism, and the gendering of unions and the welfare state. My goal in this short preface is not to survey all the rich historiography that has emerged since 1990, but rather to engage with some new ideas that bear on my original arguments in *Making a New Deal*.

As a recent, comprehensive review essay by historian David Steigerwald in the *Journal of American History* has confirmed, the field of consumer history has arrived. An abundant scholarship now so thoroughly documents “how Americans have acquired and used goods not strictly necessary to biological existence” that consumption “might well be the defining thread of American life.” Setting up T. H. Breen’s *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* and my *A Consumers’ Republic* as chronological “bookends,” Steigerwald surveys the vast literature on consumption practices to develop an argument that two “opposing understandings of the nature of consumption” have prevailed: “The one emphasizes the emancipatory potential of consumer choice for improving individual existence and challenging the status quo; the other a darker view of consumption as a process of manipulation buried within the larger system of social relations.” Linking Breen to the school that stresses the subjective aspects of consumer experience – cultural resistance and private meaning making – and me, in *Making a New Deal* as well as *A Consumers’ Republic*, to a more materialist approach that investigates “an objective, material reality linked to the state, to hard-and-fast class interests, to the geography of social life, and, above all, to how work is done,” Steigerwald concludes by proclaiming me the victor. “The widely accepted premises of the critical consumer and consumer liberation are discredited,” their claims in “bankruptcy”; “the revolt against materialism has clearly failed.”⁶

⁶ David Steigerwald, “All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought,” *Journal of American History* 93 (September 2006): 385–403.

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When the *Journal of American History* invited me and Breen to respond, I had the opportunity to revisit the literature on consumption that had emerged over the past decade and a half as well as to clarify my own take on the field. Although I was flattered at Steigerwald's endorsement, I concluded that a truer representation of my approach would posit that "the structures of capitalism, on the one hand, and more indigenous forms of cultural meaning and expression, on the other, exist in dialectical relationship." I continued, "In the dynamic evolution of consumer society, consumers can respond to market changes by establishing beachheads of private and communal meaning and even political defiance, forcing the structures of capitalism to adapt to challenges from below." I went on to cite concrete examples from both of my books as well as from the contemporary case of third-world populations' experience with first-world global capitalism – focusing on the Chinese encounter with the fast-food giant McDonald's – to demonstrate how I saw "significant moments of give-and-take in the development of the United States as a consumers' republic by the mid-twentieth century."⁷

My insistence that both the material realities and the subjective experience of consumer capitalism matter has led me to appreciate the contributions of several recent books on mass consumption in twentieth-century America. First, when I looked closely at the state policies and corporate decisions underlying the creation of what I called the consumers' republic in the post–World War II era, I recognized the importance of understanding the political economy of the locale or nation one studies. Alan Brinkley's *The End of Reform* and Meg Jacobs's *Pocketbook Politics* together illuminate the increasingly consumer-oriented political economy of the thirties and early forties. Calculations made by the Chicago industrialists and unionists and Washington policymakers I studied in *Making a New Deal* are better understood thanks to Brinkley's and Jacobs's revelations about shifts in New Deal economic thinking: the endorsement of mass purchasing power for reviving the depression economy and an abandonment of social planning and business regulation for a greater emphasis on economic growth, with the federal government promoting consumption through new, Keynesian fiscal policies.⁸ In a sense, these books filled in

⁷ Lizabeth Cohen, "Escaping Steigerwald's 'Plastic Cages': Consumers as Subjects and Objects in Modern Capitalism," *Journal of American History* 93 (September 2006): 409–13.

⁸ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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the state side of the dialectic at work when my Chicago workers embraced the unifying benefits of mass consumption and mass culture for their new national politics and national unions. Mass consumption served more than one master. Brinkley's and Jacobs's work also confirmed what I hinted at in *Making a New Deal*: that government and industry's eventual willingness to stabilize workers' earnings through collective bargaining rested to some extent on a desire to maximize their buying power in this new Keynesian age. In my research for *A Consumers' Republic*, moreover, I would discover that this increasingly consumerist state would beget not just industrial organizing, but consumer organizing as well. The 1930s, it emerged, was a crucial era for collective action by consumers demanding more protections and better treatment in the commercial marketplace.

Another cluster of books very recently published on African American experience in Chicago have elaborated in a welcome way my claim that blacks viewed the commercial marketplace as a public sphere offering cultural creativity and political autonomy. In *Making a New Deal*, I contrasted African Americans' embrace during the 1920s of brand goods, chain stores, and commercial insurance with ethnic Chicagoans' preference for encountering mass consumption and mass culture as mediated through their own indigenous community institutions, such as independent, ethnically identified mom-and-pop stores and mutual benefit associations. In the absence of many black-owned alternatives, the chains' standardized products and prices and employment opportunities made them more reliable than small independent operations run by white ethnic merchants.

Three books – Kevin Mumford's *Interzones*, Davarian Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes*, and Adam Green's *Selling the Race* – together complicate and expand my treatment of black commitment to commercial culture from the Progressive era through the mid-1950s.⁹ For Mumford, profitable Black Belt “vice districts” emerging with the Great Migration of blacks from the South to Chicago created vibrant interzones where black and white, homosexual and heterosexual could mix freely and defy the stranglehold of Chicago's hardening color line. For Baldwin, black

⁹ Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

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“culture industries” in professional sports, beauty culture, and film and music production fed a new kind of black intellectual life that revolved around debates over leisure and enterprise and fostered a new kind of political dissent from the dehumanizing effects of white-dominated capitalism. For Green, the black middle class’s active commitment to commercial, entrepreneurial activity – in promoting blues music and middle-brow magazines, for example – established the infrastructure for a more national, and more politicized, racial and class community in the postwar era.

With the goals of probing African American culture, not simply comparing it to ethnic experience as I did, of illuminating middle- as well as working-class black life, and of probing intellectual as well as popular culture, these scholars have deepened my argument that mass consumption held a unique attraction and benefit for African Americans. In *A Consumers’ Republic* I would further contribute to this analysis by demonstrating that the early civil rights movement in the 1940s and 1950s revolved around demands for equal access to public accommodations, many of which were sites of consumption. Bus boycotts, lunch-counter sit-ins, and protests at hotels, bowling alleys, department stores, and theaters became a way for African Americans to turn assumptions of equity in a “free market” to their own political advantage.

This recent work on the uniqueness of black consumer experience is part of a larger discussion of the racialized nature of American society, a second theme that has received substantial attention since *Making a New Deal* was published. At its core is the argument that from the arrival of the Irish in the mid-nineteenth century through the many population influxes of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European immigrants to the United States transcended their narrow ethnic identities by learning to see themselves as white as opposed to black, thereby enjoying common cultural bonds and political privileges. For proponents of this “whiteness” thesis, many cultural experiences (such as blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville, Hollywood movies, and advertising) promoted the bifurcation of racial identity, but ethnic Americans themselves deserved a great deal of the blame for embracing it.¹⁰ Although I did not address the

¹⁰ The literature on “whiteness” is vast; I cite here only a sampling of the most important works and critiques: David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); George Lipsitz,

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issue of racialization directly, one could view my argument that the CIO fostered a “culture of unity” cutting across racial and ethnic divisions as a refutation that a mentality of whiteness universally prevailed among the white ethnic workers who made up the rank and file of these early CIO unions in Chicago. Some critics have indeed faulted me for exaggerating the solidarity between white and black workers in the 1930s, or ending the book in 1939 before tensions between white and black union members intensified on the home front, when the federal government pledged to insist on equitable racial hiring and treatment whenever war contracts were awarded.¹¹ I stand by my argument, however, that “stopping the clock” in 1939 – when large numbers of ordinary workers took pride that they had crossed racial lines in building a powerful CIO – is not an idealization but a necessary corrective to reading a more troubled racial future back too much into our understanding of this unique historical moment.

Without denying the important insight of whiteness scholars that over the course of a century and a half of U.S. history many ethnic Americans found rewards for identifying themselves as white, I would hope that *Making a New Deal* demonstrates that claiming “the wages of whiteness,” as one of the pioneers in this field, David Roediger, put it, was not an automatic, inevitable process. Political and economic institutions played an active role in promoting whiteness, and institutions could – and did – offer alternative racial visions. Stephen Scheinberg closed his review of *Making a New Deal* in the *Canadian Journal of History* with a powerful memory of sitting on his father’s shoulders in a racially mixed crowd at Packinghouse Workers’ Hall in Chicago around 1943–44, listening to “the great Black singer and activist Paul Robeson . . . [bring] his

The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness in the Historian’s Imagination,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001), with responses by James R. Barrett, David Brody, Barbara J. Fields, Eric Foner, Victoria Hattam, Adolph Reed, Jr., and Eric Arnesen: 3–92; Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America,” *Journal of American History* 89 (2002): 154–73; Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White, the Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

¹¹ See Patricia Cooper, “Which Workers Built What?” Part of Symposium on *Making a New Deal* in *Labor History* 32 (Fall 1991), p. 568.