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Review of *Labor's Canvas: American Working-Class History and the WPA Art of the 1930s* by Laura Hapke (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), 301 pages, 37 black and white illustrations, index. ISBN (10):1-84718-415-4

Introduction

Labor's Canvas is a meticulously researched and documented work of labor history and art criticism for what art historian Jonathan Harris calls “the 1930s era” (Harris 1993). Professor Hapke uses labor art to describe and interpret the changing relationship between the working man (and less so, woman) in American society, their employers and the state. She makes the case that the art produced during the 1930s draws upon the labor art which preceded it and evolved in its depiction of social relations as these social relations were reformulated. The main narrative thread in *Labor's Canvas* is the changing nature of the labor movement in the USA from being ‘male and pale’ (white, non-immigrant) and limited to the skilled trades (predominantly represented by the American Federation of Labor and up until the mid-1930s) to one of mass unionization (as represented predominantly by the Congress of Industrial Organizations and after the mid-1930s) which included as well unskilled labor, recent immigrants from non-English speaking countries, women and people of color. We are given the major events, leaders and organizations in the labor movement as well as the larger changes in American society under which “the worker” was part and parcel including rural to urban migration, technological change, and specific analysis for specific trades (the building trades, iron and steel, mining, dock and maritime workers, textiles and garments, meatpacking, chemicals, automobiles and the artists themselves).

Hapke uses textual analysis of the art created during the period to provide both a cultural history companion to the labor history and to show the underlying tensions and ambiguities that the evolving labor unionism, Great Depression and development of the welfare state brought to those involved and to the artists trying to capture these relations. The art (mostly oil paintings, though several charcoal pieces and magazine and newspaper illustrations are included) is also used to illustrate key events and leaders in the labor movement during the period and to show the common archetypes and mythologies of labor art. An underlying theme in Professor Hapke's story is the personal and professional histories, and political leanings, of the artists and to this end Hapke has chosen purposely to represent "pro-labor Social Realism" works in her textual analysis (page 5).

Labor's Canvas is an enjoyable and thoughtful read because of its creative and unique interdisciplinary approach to the study of an important period in US history, one which represents a major transformation in US society as the federal government began playing a much larger role in people's personal and economic lives through the New Deal's creation of the US welfare state. To this end too the book can be frustrating in that its critical approach can lean towards (but gladly does not fall completely prey to) the essentialism of Marxist analysis. In that the creation of the welfare state was 'reformist' not 'revolutionary' this analytical lens can seem forced at times, as does some of the textual analysis of the works of art. However, Professor Hapke offers enough subjective individualism throughout the book to balance the Marxist determinism and thus provides a more nuanced narrative than if dependent on essentialism alone.

The Method in Labor's Canvas

As stated, the main narrative theme in *Labor's Canvas* is to tell the story of America's labor movement in 1930s through the art that was created during this period. Professor Hapke's motivation for this research can be captured in the first sentence of the book, "At an unprecedented and probably unique American moment, laboring people were indivisible from the art of the 1930s" (page 1). (It is plain to see, given the WPA public works statistics listed later in this paper, that indeed it was a time of great manual labor throughout the United States.) The second motivation for Hapke's research can be captured, "Through artistically rendered working-class history, we can study the cultural contradictions about laboring people evident even in the depths of the Great Depression. Crucial in this regard are the dominant forms of artistic decisions about depicting labor's body.

We can observe the labor inclusions and exclusions of FAP canvases and drawings, the types of jobs artistically chosen, the relation of the body to the particular landscape” (page 8).

Hapke then uses for textual (and contextual) analysis works chosen purposefully to tell this story.¹

My selections are not as problematic as the vast FAP output would suggest. But the intersection between the sheer volumes of works (works I have either seen or read about) and the reiterated industrial, urban, and rural folk themes suggests repeated patterns, as capable art, social and political historians have often observed. Given the enormity of artistic production on the WPA there can be no catalogue raisonne of 1930s art. Any study, particularly one conceived of as a subfield of cultural criticism – i.e., working class studies - must often choose depth over breadth. I have chosen a sizable spectrum of well-known artists....Balancing these painters-printers are practitioners better known to New Deal art and cultural scholars....Together, they and others discussed here contribute to a labor art tapestry of the FAP’s achievements and limitations” (pages 13-14).

The chapters in the book follow thematically from the thesis of the book. In the first chapter we find an introduction to labor art and the use of Gramscian cultural analysis (specifically about the use of anti-hegemonic subtexts in art and the artist as cultural worker) used throughout *Labor’ Canvas* and an introduction to the ideas presented in the main body of the work, seven chapters. Chapter 2 finds examples of pre-1930s labor art and a discussion of wage-labor in the capitalist state. The discussion on the movement from iron to steel production and the effect of new technology on labor is in-depth and rewarding. In Chapter 3 we start the study of 1930s art and although this chapter is subtitled ‘Laboring WPA Art’ none of the art depicted is actually from the 1935-1943 WPA period. One of the chapter themes is the AFL period transitioning into the CIO period (founded in 1936) and a discussion of the dialectic between official art and radical art, or “Big Body’s appeal to shapers of the federally sanctioned visual narrative of recovery” (page 54) versus how “the martial spirit of the early Communist movement informed leftist journal covers and drawing” (page 55).

Chapter 4 focuses on “white male” art depictions (the Chapter is entitled ‘Looking Whiteness in the Face: Portraits by three Cultural Workers’) where we

¹ One wonders what the story might be like if the sampling process were random, if one could pick say 30 works of art known to be FAP art and then study the works’ thematic and stylistic content.

are introduced more specifically to the pre-inclusive CIO period and how AFL white exclusivity did not bode well with all artists of the period.

[Elizabeth] Olds was one of the few portrait artists to deconstruct whiteness in the name of cultural pluralism. Her fellow portraitist Alice Neel took whiteness one step further: to the spectral. In challenging the whiteness of the laboring figure, she provided one of the most stirring CIO artworks of her time (page 109).

Chapter 5 then moves beyond the individual into how crowds are depicted in 1930s art, where we are introduced to Reginald Marsh's iconographic *Breadline – No One Has Starved* (1932) and other works depicting crowds of job-seekers, strikers and labor rally attendees. We have now completed our transition into the post-1935 CIO era, “Put another way, the dialectic in their works was between the CIO's labor strength and a rank-and-file obedience that seemed to sabotage the old AFL individuality. Marsh, Kish, and their colleagues embraced the political message that hard times reduce men to hanging together lest they hang separately” (page 152). Chapters 6 and 7 are about how blacks and women are depicted in the 1930s art, respectively. Chapter 6 uses the legend of John Henry as a metaphor for the black man's transition to wage-labor and industrial technology whereas Chapter 7, ‘Women, Labor, and the WPA Imagination’², uses feminist analysis to deconstruct the stereotyping of women in (1930s) art despite perhaps facts pointing elsewhere.

We have already studied how bent or emaciated women in the sewing rooms or clothing factories were pictorially relegated to a tenement or quasi-domestic space. WPA paintings of public demonstrations similarly sidelined them or used them merely to swell the crowd. Such marginalization was in stark contrast to the role of New York City garment workers in actual events throughout the decade (page 211).

The final chapter in *Labor's Canvas* is perhaps the most valuable contribution to cultural studies of the 1930s in that it discusses the artist as “worker”. The chapter title, ‘Artists and Plumber: Imagining the FAP Body’ is taken from the 1934 *American Magazine of Art* article “Will Plumbers Wages Turn the Trick?” by Edward B. Rowan which was written during the pre-WPA period when artists first

² Chapter 7 also includes extensive demographic and sociological data to help the reader understand the larger macroeconomic trends under study in the micro-analysis of the art. It is unfortunate that the other chapters are not as extensive in this regard, especially the first overview chapter.

began to get relief wages under the New Deal administration. This chapter discusses the labor history of the artists themselves during the 1930s, including the educational programs of the John Reed Club, the formation and transformation of the Artist Union and its agitational Artists' Committee of Action, the artists' push for a continued federal arts program, and the AFL rejection of most artists and their subsequent acceptance into the CIO. Hapke reproduces the masthead of the AU newspaper *Art Front*, which shows a clenched fist holding paintbrushes, as a representation that indeed artists considered themselves workers allied with the working-class of the period.³

Yet there were other visual replies by artists whose self-interest in perpetuating the FAP paralleled their conviction that they were cultural militants taking action against government intransigence. Half of the New York City FAP members [relief workers, *sic*] read the AU journal *Art Front*, which transformed paintbrushes and sculpting tools into true weapons of action. Without irony, its front page iconography offered an alternative to both Soyer's stoic and Mangravite's hapless forms (page 262).

Hapke in the end makes the case that the works of art produced during the 1930s are filled with perhaps unknowable and oftentimes contradictory messages ("dual and even multiple meanings," page 1) and this, rather than the art itself, is what makes the art of the period of lasting interest to historians.

But there was another artist legacy, born from individual artists' responses to the ordinary workers and trade union luminaries they observed, and at times marched with. In that enterprise, artists attempted to place workers in the history of their time. That task, to overcome the divisions between the artist and subject, entailed overcoming class separations that had long informed American artistry. Answering the call to go out and paint did not diminish the difficulty of imprinting real labor on imagined bodies, including their own (page 270).

Approach to this critique of Labor's Canvas

As stated, one of the weaknesses in the book is the oftentimes essentialist nature of the analysis.⁴ By focusing on 'capitalism' and thus the class struggle Hapke can

³ Hapke also points-out that the "strong-arm logo" was on the AU membership button which read "FOR A PERMANENT ART PROJECT, FOR A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE (capitalization in the original)", page 264.

⁴ Essentialism according to F.A. Hayek is when the social scientist uses a "concept" or a "theory" (say for example the existence of a class struggle in all places at all times under the

miss the larger political and economic currents in the 1930s which informed the evolving social relations of the time. This is especially true in looking at the cause of the Great Depression and its prolongation and how employers and employees were made to adjust to government policy and changing economic circumstances.

My critical approach has its genesis in Charles Beard from his 1913 book, *The Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, where he states, “Sadly as the economic factors have been ignored in historical studies, the neglect has been all the more pronounced in the field of public and private law” (page 7). *Labor’s Canvas* is a good example of ‘Beard’s lament’ in that the reader can be made to view the legal and economic changes in American society strictly through the lens of class struggle. This is unfortunate because, on the one hand, Marx’s resolution to the class struggle was a worker’s revolution, the politics of which remain a thread in Hapke’s political analysis, yet, the history of the time shows that it was capitalism itself which was transformed not a transformation *from* capitalism.⁵ One misses how the larger policy changes of the New Deal are affecting American society when reading 1930s history predominantly as a trade-off in power between capital and labor.

The second object of analysis in this review is what Hapke represents as the policies of the Works Progress Administration - Federal Art Project itself. ‘Beard’s lament’ holds in this case as well as *Labor’s Canvas* is not clear as to specifically what were the FAP requirements for artists producing art on the government payroll, nor indeed as to what artworks presented in the book are FAP art or merely “1930s art”. Given the vagueness of this presentation, as will be

capitalist stage of human development) to describe the behavior of individuals and the institutions created through the complex social interactions of a free society. Social interaction then becomes viewed through this lens as opposed to being analyzed and interpreted upon the facts alone.

The special difficulty of the social sciences is a result, not merely of the fact that we have to distinguish between the views held by the people which are the object of our study and our views about them, but also of the fact that the people who are our object themselves not only are motivated by ideas but also form ideas about the undersigned results of their actions – popular theories about various social structures or formations which we share with them and which our study has to revise and improve. The danger of substituting “concepts” (or “theories”) for the facts is by no means absent in the social sciences and failure to avoid it has exercised as detrimental effect here as in the natural sciences. . . . The real contrast is between ideas which by being held by the people become the cause of the social phenomenon and the ideas which people form about the phenomenon (Hayek 1952, pages 62-63).

⁵ The danger of losing ‘top-down’ political history in a cultural or ‘bottom-up’ history is of course not unique to *Labor’s Canvas*.

shown below, the second half of the subtitle of the book (*...and the WPA Art of the 1930s*) should perhaps be changed to “*and the Golden Age of Worker Art*”, a term Hapke herself uses early-on (page 2).

Capitalism and The Great Depression as represented in Labor’s Canvas

The greatest lament in reading *Labor’s Canvas* is that the book is missing the fact that it was government policy itself which created the economic hardships of the Depression.⁶ If we look at the Depression as a failure of capitalism, of capitalist greed (which after all has been a constant throughout history and therefore cannot be a cause of the Great Depression), or excessive exploitation of the worker, we miss the underlying economic causes for the very transformations we wish to depict in a history of the 1930s labor movement. This Beardian lament is most prevalent in Hapke’s under-emphasis of the Wagner Act of 1935 which is perhaps *the* most significant event in labor relations during the inter-war era.⁷ The following are some quotes about the Wagner Act in Labor’s canvas which we will shall evaluate in some detail.

- 1) A few decades later, with the newly passed Wagner Act, even the work-floor discontent was a kind of power. With the coming of the 1930s, the once-expressionless, long suffering, artificially contented, ghostly, or glowering faces would form part of a much more militant physiognomic and body catalog (page 44).
- 2) It was, after all, a time when the 1934 [1933, *sic*] National Recovery Administration and the Wagner Act [1935] had generated union conflict with both the government and employers over what fair competition meant to rank-and-file salaries and skill levels⁸. Unrest among working-class people was widespread during a decade when

⁶ See Powell 2003, p. viii, for a critique of political histories of the Great Depression and the New Deal for their lack of including economic analyses available since the 1960s which show that New Deal policies prolonged the worldwide Great Contraction of 1929-1933 into the Great Depression in the US.

⁷ See Sewell 2005 on the use of “significant events” in the social sciences as a model to describe changes in social structure which then change the historical path of a society.

⁸ The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was passed in 1933 and Roosevelt used an Executive Order to create the National Recovery Agency (NRA) the same year. The NRA, which allowed (required, if an industry wanted government contracts, or to display the NRA Blue Eagle sign of buy-in to the New Deal and it’s message of ‘national recovery’) industry to set production limits and keep prices high was declared unconstitutional in 1935. The NRA also set industry minimum wages and minimum working hours and the NIRA’s section 7(a) gave

the labor movement was in turmoil. Many industrial laborers were simply not prepared to “await instructions from their putative leaders” (page 54).

The Wagner Act of 1935 radically reformed industrial relations in the United States, removing the ability of employers to bring civil suit against organized labor in the judicial branch of government and placing the administration of justice for labor relations under the executive branch through the National Labor Relations Board. This Act gave quasi- or actual monopoly power bargaining rights to organized labor along with the oft-used right to strike (Powell 2003 and Shlaes 2007). Membership in unions increased more than 200% from 1935 to 1940, from around 11% to 24% of the workforce (Carter, *et al* 2006).⁹ This new power given to unions of course expressed itself in a more “militant” (see quote 1. above) labor force seeking to exercise these rights.

If we look at quote 2. above we see perhaps a misreading of the causes and effects of the Wagner Act. The Wagner Act, a political payoff to organized labor who strongly supported Roosevelt in the 1933 election, shifted the balance of power to the labor unions, a policy which was supported by the administration and thus not in “conflict” with the administration. True, the government as *employer* also felt the effect of the increased power of unions, but the government as employer did not have to abide by the Wagner Act, although did negotiate with the unions throughout the 1930s in relation to the implementation of the WPA¹⁰ which

unions the right to organize and bargain collectively (The NIRA’s section 7(a) also created the National Labor Board to settle disputes under the Act as opposed to having disputes settled under the regular U.S. judicial system). These labor requirements, in addition to others, were then carried-over to the Wagner Act which was passed in 1935 after the NRA was declared unconstitutional as a violation of states’ rights.

⁹ Unionization reached its peak in the U.S.A. in 1945 with around 34% of the labor force members of a union (Carter, *et al* 2006, p. 2-56.)

¹⁰ Ironically enough the increased power of the labor unions after the Wagner Act also effected the state cultural production of the FAP. By 1940 the administrators of the New York City FAP, which employed during its life-of-program roughly half of the easel painters on the project (see *Labor’s Canvas*, page 4), relinquished direct content approval to a committee including labor union members due to continuous agitation by the Artists Union whose President was Stuart Davis, one of the most famous of American painters. See O’Connor papers, Reel 1084, for details on this committee approval process. See Goldberg 2005 for more information on the relationship between organized labor and the WPA.

was the largest government program in US history, representing in its initial appropriation almost 7% of national income (Smith 2008). With such a large buildup in union activity in such a short period of time it is quite easy to see why Professor Hapke might view this as a period of “turmoil”.

Additionally if we are to address the causes of unemployment among working-class people (who understandably were not willing to “await instructions” with unemployment averaging 17% during the 1930s) we must evaluate both the NIRA’s and the Wagner Act’s effect on the economy. Both of these Acts prevented employers and producers from freely setting wages to match economic conditions. As was shown by Friedman and Anna Schwartz (1963) the “Great Contraction” of 1929-1933 (unemployment had reached 25% in 1933, the highest it would reach during the Depression) was caused by the Federal Reserve Bank of the United State’s contractionary monetary policy. This policy lowered prices throughout the economy sending signals to employers that they would be able to sell their goods for less money. This in turn meant that they had to decrease the rate of pay they were able to offer employees. Because they were not able to do so, first under the NRA administrative rules, then later under the Wagner Act, it is no surprise that employers were not able to increase the number of workers they could hire. This of course then just increased labor unrest during the period.¹¹

An essentialist reading of social relations under capitalism which sees government as a tool for enforcing the existing social order, be it even towards labor as opposed to capital, may not be able to capture the disaggregated power struggles between ‘organized’ labor and the laboring person who is not a member of a union. Hapke does capture the problem with using essentialist methodology when she states, “Whether Party stalwart or severe critic, prounion *or* prolabor, tolerant of the AFL or not, artists on the FAP were not unconflictedly proworker” (page 7, emphasis added). Hapke recognizes here that the purpose of a union is to keep wages high, which helps those in the union but hurts those that are not in the

¹¹ Additionally, if as commonly assumed, economic growth is required to create labor employment growth then the NRA was not helpful in this regard either. “Under the NRA [Administrator] Ickes had authority to set production quotas, an authority he used to curtail supply in the name of driving up prices,” Shlaes 2007, p. 151. The 2004 Nobel Memorial Laureate in Economics, Edward Prescott states, “I think these institutions and actions [the NIRA, NRA and the Agriculture Adjustment Act which cartelized the agriculture sector] are what caused the Great Depression,” quoted in Parker 2007, p. 22.

union because mandated high wages decrease the number of jobs in the economy¹², thus unionization itself is not necessarily good for *all* labor, just *some* labor. Hapke also recognizes that unions themselves are sources of contestation; “Patri and Huberman were interested in unity and in conveying the everyman nature of the seaman, but in fact there was no such solidarity in the wake of the 1934 and 1936 strikes....support for their leader was far from unanimous” (page 146).

- 3) When the NRA ended in 1935, the Wagner Act’s Section 7a [*sic*, it was the NIRA which contained section 7(a), the rules of section 7(a) were restated in the Wagner Act] empowerment of collective bargaining spurred John L. Lewis’s break from the staid, craft-based AFL. By the summer of 1936, Lewis and his allies in the mines and the clothing trades had used the CIO to storm steel, a citadel of anti-unionism. As one worker remembered, “In the AFL in those days nobody seemed interested in us” (page 57).
- 4) With the June 1933 passage of the National [Industrial, *sic*] Recovery Act, and the Section 7a guarantees, at least on paper, of collective bargaining rights, more and more artists reinvigorated the regimented trudging of [artists] Marsh and Kish. The months following passage of this act coincided with the first full year of the WPA and FAP programs. After that time, many artists from Chicago and the industrial Northeast were prompted to trade breadlines for marching bodies demanding labor rights and increased wages (page 138).

The quotes above, 3) and 4), illustrate the key narrative in *Labor’s Canvas* which is the mass unionization movement facilitated by the passage of the Wagner Act (although as stated the Act is not mentioned in the book explicitly as the significant cause of this change in social structure). Until 1935 the AFL was the predominant union in the United States, after the Act the CIO came into power under John L. Lewis. The more inclusive CIO then lead to more union radicalism, “especially during the brief period of Soviet - American cooperation” (page 146).¹³

¹² An oft-used folk wisdom is that “the Great Depression wasn’t so bad if you had a job”.

¹³ In August 1935 the Comintern declared the Popular Front, which became the Democratic Front in the US in 1937. The CPUSA began to support the Roosevelt Administration and the CPUSA’s house organ the *New Masses* “became uniformly laudatory about the [federal art] projects by 1938”, Hemingway 2008, pp. 183-185. Coincidentally the newly oppositional Congress required loyalty oaths for FAP artists by 1938 (*Labor’s Canvas*, page 5). The 1939 Nazi – Soviet Pact meant the disenfranchisement of some artists sympathetic towards communism, including withdrawal of membership with the Democratic Front-supported American Artist’s Congress (Harris 1993, p.39).

Hapke makes the argument that the art in the period followed this trend showing instead of unemployed masses and disembodied labor a more powerful and unified labor force. This aesthetic trend is typified by Giacomo Patri's cover art for the *Storm over Bridges* (1941) pamphlet which was funded by the CIO and distributed to over 50,000 International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) members as part of the Harry Bridges defense fund against HUAC charges that Bridges was a "known communist" (p. 145).¹⁴ Patri's art shows a mass of workers dressed alike in proletarian clothing marching together in larger than life, Soviet Socialist Realism form, the 'new man' under the worker's rule. "Defiant these workers are a red brigade. Everyone of them is a Bridges clone....this crowd reminds one of the 'positively radiant Soviet people of the industrial generation'" (page 146).

We can find in *Labor's Canvas* evidence of the movement from labor art depicting the state as the enemy of the worker pre-Wagner Act 1935 to the post-Wagner Act pro-union government stance, including the cartelization of both wages and output prices as mandated by the NRA.

Whatever his failures in organizing unaffiliated construction workers, Lewis indisputably had accreting power in mining. Indeed, his UMW power launched his meteoric CIO career. Early mining elements on the left accused him, however of sapping the strength of the unorganized miners to his own ends. In one New Masses cartoon by Jacob Burck, Lewis even joins FDR and Frances Perkins [FDR's Labor Secretary] in attacking a miner. But by the Popular Front era, Lewis had trounced the NMU, which had challenged him in the coal fields in the early 1930s. In 1936 the UMW went from an embattled majority to a solid labor organization. Working with the federal government, the UMW helped ensure that despite a decline in the demand for coal, minimum prices would be established to yield a fair return to miners (page 67).¹⁵

Illustration 1 captures the main thesis in *Labor's Canvas*, showing the growth of the CIO after the mid-1930s and how the labor art of the period captures the spirit of this movement.

¹⁴ Although it should be noted that the support by FAP artists for a unanimous mass labor movement should not be overemphasized. An exhibit of NYC FAP art which was shown without artists' signatures on the works of art created a vast protest by workers against the FAP administrator (O'Connor papers, Reel 1084).

¹⁵ See Powell 2003 on government-sanctioned cartelization under the NRA on the condition that monopoly rents are shared with unions.

Illustration 1.

Primary *Labor's Canvas* narrative:

Until the Mid-1930s	From the Mid-1930s Onward
American Federation of Labor (AFL) Era	Growth of Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO)
"Male and Pale" - white male-dominated unions	Blacks and "ethnic" Europeans start to unionize and gain acceptance into white unions
Unionization based on skilled, "craft" or "artisan", labor	Period of "mass unionization" with unskilled labor joining skilled labor
Labor is seen as in opposition to both capital and government	Labor is seen as in opposition to capital but as allied with government

WPA artists capture this changing relationship in their art

The Aesthetics of Alienation under Capitalism in Labor's Canvas

Laura Hapke uses the cultural criticism methods of Antonio Gramsci throughout the book to describe and critique "the concept of ideological constructions under the hegemonic power of the capitalist state" (page 25). In textual analysis of what Hapke uses as an example of early labor art (illustrating a bridge between the classicism or academicism of pre-Depression era labor art and that of the New Deal ideology of 'the art of everyday life' or 'cultural democracy'), Thomas Anshutz' *The Ironworkers' Noontime* (1880), we learn,

To apply the Gramscian model of subtexts of rebellion within the official sanctioned text¹⁶, Anshutz produced a tremendously suggestive vision of restlessness during the working men's rest period. However dutifully he applies the classical model of the mechanic gymnast, he subverts it as well. His figures' arrested motion seems a self-conscious removal from the hired busyness of foundry work. Behind the psychological wall these men have erected, they seem to express a feeling that is neither individual nor communal. One analyst of the painter has noted that their 'individuality' has become diffused and amorphous. They seem objects rather than subjects in their work lives (page 30).

We find again enigmatic textual readings of a New Deal-era artwork, James Lessene Wells' *Negro Worker* (c. 1938).

Is he looking at the blind alley of his labor future? If so, is he questioning his own labor worth? Or is he longing for a distant and impossible refuge? Answers do not present themselves. What is clear is that this statuesque figure has survived the fate of John Henry and found himself in the assembly-line age. Yet, like his predecessor, he is not connected to this new landscape. In fact he turns his back on it. He is both excluded and alienated (p. 184).

In fact we might be able to find the answer for inscrutable symbolic depictions of wage-labor in both Marx and one of his predecessors in the classical political economy school, Adam Smith. Smith in *Wealth of Nations* (1776) foretold that specialization of labor would bring repetitiveness at the job site and thus a diminished quality of worklife. Marx in the *Manuscripts of 1844* called this the alienation of the working class, the wage-labor of the capitalist workplace being counter to our essence as humans. It should come as no surprise to readers of labor art under capitalism that the worker is ambivalent towards his or her situation. To carry this one step further we can find answer that perhaps, yes, the *Negro Worker* is "longing for a distant and impossible refuge", Marx' classless society or an escape from the 'double freedoms of capitalism'¹⁷, and perhaps not the

¹⁶ One might ask why the self-produced art for speculation by a tenured art professor (Thomas Anshutz) might be an 'officially sanctioned text' requiring subtexual subversion, as opposed to say work produced for government pay under the state cultural production of the FAP. This might be another 'Beardian lament' of confusing legal analysis in history writing.

¹⁷ One reading of Marx's 'double freedoms' under capitalism is that we have the freedom to work for whom we like (unlike under feudalism), however we also have the right to starve if we do not work.

determinism of the capitalist class struggle as essentialist ‘Marxist’ cultural readings teach. He is alienated yes, but as he is employed, he is not excluded. Lastly what we are viewing is artwork *about* the job site, to read anything more into the individuals depicted in the art other than that the art represents a person at work, is an economically deterministic approach to understanding the larger social relations and interactions amongst individuals in a society, a society which includes more than just the workplace of capitalistic wage-labor.

“WPA Art” and Labor’s Canvas

As stated in the Introduction to this review to say that *Labor’s Canvas* is a cultural history of the artwork produced under the Works Progress Administration may be a misnomer. Of the 37 works of art reproduced in the book, only 22 are within the time periods, 1935-1943, during which the WPA’s Federal Art Project was operating and of these one is from the 1941 ILWU/CIO publication *Storm Over Bridges* (and thus of course not a government-financed work of art), one is the masthead from the Artists Union publication *Art Front* (1936), one is identified in the text as not being within the period the artist worked for the WPA, one is a photograph, not a drawing or painting (e.g. not a “canvas”), and unfortunately one, William Gropper’s *Youngstown Strike* (1936-1937), is missing altogether and in its place is a second reproduction of Thomas Hart Benton’s *Trouble on the Picket Line* (1930), which appears again later in the book and which could easily cause confusion for the uninitiated reader due to like subject matter. Most importantly, the identifications for each work of art on the full pages (B&W) where the artworks are reproduced do not identify whether or not the work, if produced during the relevant time period, was actually painted whilst the artist was employed by the WPA-FAP nor if the work was produced for the FAP or privately in “off-hours”.¹⁸ Gropper’s *Youngstown Strike* for example is now owned by the

¹⁸ The Francis V. O’Connor papers at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, DC contain government payroll records for many of the 1,000 artists O’Connor had identified as working on the New Deal art projects, and had sent questionnaires to during his archival project in the late 1960s. Perhaps Laura Hapke could have used these records to help identify if a work was painted at the time an artist was under the employment of the WPA. However, it is not clear how accurate the government payroll records are. For example one of the artists most identified with the WPA, Ben Shan, is listed as on the official government payroll records located in Reels 1089-1090 as working for the government from June 1, 1934 to September 17, 1935, yet, Soby (1947) states, “In 1933 Shahn was enrolled in the Federal Government’s Public Works of Art Project....From September 1935 to May 1938, Shahn worked for the Farm Security Administration as an artist, and very briefly, as a photographer with the euphemistic title of

Butler Institute for American Art in Youngstown, Ohio through a museum purchase which sends a signal that it was produced privately because all works produced for the WPA were given (loaned) to not-for-profit or government organizations with ownership rights remaining with the US Government prior to the decentralization of the WPA to the states in 1939 (GSA 1999).

Although this critique of an otherwise methodologically sound book might seem like “comma-chasing”, the lack of a clear connection between the art and its government funding source can prove distracting for those interested in serious analysis of state cultural production and the creation of the American welfare state (the federal government’s share of national income increased from less than 10% of national income in 1913 to around 40% in 1948 where it has more or less remained ever since). Without well-documented sources for the textual analysis performed in the narrative it is hard to make the case that what is being analyzed is state cultural production as opposed to art produced privately during the period. This would make a big difference in understanding the end-result of the Federal Art Project policy as actually implemented. The art history as presented is still quite insightful (if taken as a study of art produced during the Depression and not as “public art”), however it may not be what Professor Hapke, nor the reader, hopes that it represents.¹⁹

‘Senior Liaison Officer’ to guarantee him a living wage,” pages 8-9. Jacob Lawrence (who has a 1943 painting in *Labor’s Canvas*) is listed as working for the WPA from 1938 to 1939 and Harry Sternberg (who has a 1940 work discussed in the book) is listed as employed with the WPA from 1935-1936 (e.g. both of these artists’ work discussed in *Labor’s Canvas* appear to have not been painted when the artist was employed with the WPA, whereas Kyra Markham, with a 1935-1936 piece in the book, is listed in payroll records as with the WPA from 1935 to 1937.

¹⁹ In addition there are other examples of ‘comma-chasing’ in the book which can make the presentation of the art as FAP-produced frustrating to the scholar. For example artist Maynard Dixon’s work at the Hoover Dam in 1934 is stated as being part of the WPA art project, yet the WPA was not funded until 1935 (page 141). The wage schedules referenced on page 3 were for 1934 when again the WPA didn’t start until 1935. On page 25 we learn that “By 1934, despite some WPA commissions and the appearance of a never-published 1909 charcoal, *Miners*, in a 1937 magazine, he [Joseph Stella] had long-turned away from his own corpus of industrial wage-earners”. In fact in addition to the faulty WPA chronology, the WPA also did not commission works of art. The WPA was funded by relief appropriations and hired-on artists according to wage and hour schedules and not for specific works of art. It was the art programs under the Treasury Department which used commissions for state art acquisition, and thus, perhaps it is the Treasury Department’s art output (mostly murals) which may be more soundly categorized as state cultural production as these works were vetted by committee before being considered as complete. It would be harder to make the case that Treasury art was produced by ‘cultural

The textual analysis of the art if considered as “WPA-era art” as opposed to “WPA art” would be quite valid as the WPA during the late 1930s was deeply ingrained in American culture; almost 25% of all American families received income from the WPA during its time-span and around 6% of the workforce was employed by the WPA at any one time during the mid-to-late 1930s (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1947 and Darby 1976). Even absent the direct employment aspects of the WPA, the program was unavoidable in American people’s lives as between 1935 and 1943 the WPA built approximately 78,000 bridges, 40,000 public buildings, 67,000 miles of city streets, 24,000 miles of sidewalks, 24,000 miles of sewer lines, 19,700 miles of water mains, 500 water treatment facilities and 572,000 miles of rural highways (Smith 2006). The WPA art project itself hired around 5,000 artists, produced more than 100,000 paintings, had 100 public centers (at least one in all 48 states) for the display and teaching of art and produced more than one million lithographs during the same period that the massive number of public works projects were being built (*Labor’s Canvas*, page 4). It may not be important in the overall cultural context if the art in *Labor’s Canvas* was government-funded due to the overwhelming presence of the WPA in people’s lives, but the case that the book is about WPA-funded art is not made.

Federal Art Project Policy, Cultural Democracy and Labor’s Canvas

Researchers dealing with the actual implementation of the WPA have found that WPA projects were very much decentralized because local (as opposed to federal) WPA administrators had considerable leeway as to who was hired and how much they were paid.²⁰ In addition it has been shown that wages for politically-strategic

workers’ because the artists were paid on commission per piece and not paid wage scales which applied uniformly to skill levels as set for all WPA projects, including the Federal Art Project.

²⁰ See Howard 1943 on local WPA administrator freedoms and Harris 1995, “Local Project administrations could and did, however, alter and even ignore the federal guidelines”, p. 34. There were mandated wage category maximums per month per skill level by geographic region for WPA relief workers. However, by reducing total monthly hours local administrators could therefore increase per hour wages. In addition, for the art project, local administrators (usually State or Regional Directors and their delegates) were able to determine at which skill category an artist was hired and whether or not the artist was granted approval for a requested geographical reassignment, this in turn of course affected rates of pay. Finally, at least for the NYC FAP artists were given the right to take private commissions then return to the Project once the private sector employment was finished (O’Connor papers, Reel 1084). This resulted in some artists being employed by the art project off-and-on for many years at a time with the project acting as a

regions were higher than politically-unimportant areas (Wallis 1987) and that WPA employment levels in general were higher during Roosevelt presidential re-election campaigns (Howard 1947). Thus from this perspective it may not be possible to separate a cultural policy, based on employment numbers and pay for cultural workers, from political strategy.

In addition, my own archival research has shown that local WPA art project administrators were delegated authority for “quality control” over what was considered acceptable as WPA art and acted as cultural gatekeepers choosing which artworks were chosen to be displayed as WPA art.²¹ There is a general consensus that Regionalism and Social Realism works were preferred over Abstract works, yet there were exceptions.²² And, by 1940, at least in the New York City art project (which hired 50% of the approximately 5,000 easel painters over the life of the WPA) due to Artist Union lobbying, the art which was chosen for WPA-FAP exhibits to represent the project were selected by committee. (O’Connor papers, Reel 1084). Thus it is not clear that we can generalize a content requirement for cultural production under the WPA.

Labor’s Canvas can therefore be somewhat essentialist in assuming that artist subtextual messages are a reaction against a dominant, hegemonic, art project strategy. Each artist had their own relationship locally with each project administration. Therefore the use of Gramscian analytical tools to read anti-hegemonic messages in the art might be a stretch unless we can view the employer-employee relationship under capitalism itself as an unequal hegemonic relationship, which is fair. However the fact that the Artist Union continually lobbied for addition fundings and a permanent federal art project shows that perhaps many artists did not consider the art project suppressive.²³ What is

kind of permanent employer, perhaps counter to the Congressional intent of the WPA funding being for emergency relief.

²¹ See for example National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, Record Group 69, Entry 1024, Boxes 54-57, for many files of correspondence relating to the Regional WPA Director located in San Francisco, CA choosing works to be sent to Washington, DC as part of national WPA art shows and for art to be placed in universities, schools and museums in the Western areas of the United States during the period 1935-1937.

²² See Harris 1995 on the preference for realism in FAP works. However, O’Connor papers, Reel 1084, shows Holger Cahill, the National Director of the FAP, promoting both abstract and realist/regionalist exhibits and artists groups in the 1940s.

²³ See Hemingway 2008, *Labor’s Canvas*, Chapter 8, and O’Connor papers, Reel 1084, for the extensive Artist Union lobbying efforts for permanent funding from the federal government.

missing from *Labor's Canvas* in this regard is more solid documentation as to what FAP policy was and how it was implemented. Throughout the book there are repeated references to artists reacting against policy, but we are not told in any clear terms exactly what this policy was.²⁴ In fact, Helen Langa (2008) makes the point that perhaps there was no policy at all.

Although one goal of the New Deal art programs was to enhance a national ethos of independence and vitality, few artists except those working on mural projects understood this as essential to their purpose. Rather they turned to subjects of personal interest that reflected a vastly diverse panorama of American cultural life, from baseball to steel-making, themes that held both personal interest but also the potential of populist appeal. Indeed many artists working for the Federal Art Project later asserted that they experienced almost complete freedom in both thematic and aesthetic choices (page 170).

Finally, the goals of “cultural democracy”, the operative mantra of the New Deal art project, is itself contested terrain and perhaps in the end was unsustainable due to its own internal contradictions. This would help us to understand why Professor Hapke finds so many conflicting meanings in what she has presented in the book as public art. The following is another quote from Helen Langa (2008).

In arguing for this expansion of traditional views of cultural activity, advocates of cultural democracy and state support for the arts drew on three contradictory sources: continuing Progressive ideals of social improvement, Regionalist efforts to affirm local values and reject elitist urbanized forms of modernism, and leftist valorizations of art as a revolutionary weapon. They did not merge easily, since the first two drew on values tending towards the preservation of liberal capitalism and the latter associated with contemporary leftist efforts to shift American culture towards socialist ideals (page 166).

²⁴ The following are a few lines from *Labor's Canvas* about an FAP policy against which artists had to react. “Many WPA artists provided rebellious subtexts in response to supervisors’ attempts to control cultural production”, page 128. “In some paintings, impoverished white people, suffering the scars of the Depression are skeleton faces attached to thin bodies...Not surprisingly, the painting was no favorite with her WPA supervisors”, page 109. “All were employed by WPA or FAP agencies as sometime muralists and painters or printmakers, or both, and were hired to illustrate an upbeat theme on the unity of all people and all trades in a refurbished economy”, page 57. “These are men with hands around each other’s throats. (These troubling labor pictures, melding aggressor and victim, were hung at the leftist ACA Gallery in Greenwich Village rather than the WPA’s midtown Municipal Art Gallery)”, page 149. This last quote is especially troubling because it makes it seem like the ACA Gallery show was a subversive act when in fact the NYC FAP project worked with many private galleries to show FAP art.

Hapke herself acknowledges these inherent and perhaps irresolvable contradictions in any attempt to create an official national language of art based on a glorification of the laboring person.

However simplified the golden age of worker art appears from our modern perspective, FAP art production revealed other equally important tensions. Artists saw themselves as cultural workers who had much in common with the blue-collar workforce. Yet artistically, they struggled to reconcile social protest and aesthetic distance. Ideologically, their canvases, prints, and drawings registered the attitudes toward laborers as bodies without minds often shared by the wider culture. In choosing a visual language to reconnect workers to the larger society, they tried to tell the worker from the work, with varying success (pages 2- 3).

Conclusion

We have seen in Laura Hapke's *Labor's Canvas* how her selections of American art from the 1930s helped to capture and track the larger social changes in American capitalism during the Great Depression. The book contains perhaps two main flaws, the first being the lack of economic and political analysis showing how the larger labor and industrial policies of the Roosevelt Administration actually helped to create the unemployment and economic hardships depicted in the art during the period. In this, Professor Hapke is not selected out for special criticism, this oversight or neglect is common in many histories of the period. The second main flaw is that the book is missing specific analysis of the artworks studied in the book to show that they were indeed state cultural production (public art). This then means that *Labor's Canvas* does not add to our understanding of state cultural production during the build-up of the American welfare state. However, even if each work of art was specifically tracked to its individual funding source it would be hard to generalize from selected works an over-all state cultural strategy for the New Deal. Local Federal Art Project administrators were given considerable leeway in their content and stylistic approvals for WPA funded art so perhaps no one "official" style can be deemed as *the* sanctioned New Deal art.²⁵ Accepting these limitations to the work under consideration we can justly find that *Labor's Canvas* is a remarkable piece of interdisciplinary scholarship, combining art

²⁵ This can be juxtaposed with the USSR where Stalin declared in 1932 in "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations" that only artworks depicting Socialist Realism were allowed.

criticism and art history, labor history, working class history, cultural studies and political biography depicting a unique period in American history where many artists were on the federal government payroll for years at a time.

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