

THE “TRIAL” OF LEE BENSON: COMMUNISM, WHITE
CHAUVINISM, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE
“NEW POLITICAL HISTORY” IN THE UNITED STATES¹

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ABSTRACT

Lee Benson was one of the first American political historians to suggest a “systematic” revision of traditional political history with its emphasis on narrow economic class analysis, narrative arguments, and over-reliance on qualitative research methodologies. This essay presents Benson’s contributions to the “new political history”—an attempt to apply social-science methods, concepts, and theories to American political history—as a social, cultural, and political narrative of Cold War-era American history. Benson belonged to a generation of ex-Communist American historians and political scientists whose scholarship and intellectual projects flowed—in part—out of Marxist social and political debates, agendas, and paradigmatic frameworks, even as they rejected and revised them. The main focus of the essay is the genesis of Benson’s pioneering study of nineteenth-century New York state political culture, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, with its emphasis on intra-class versus inter-class conflict, sensitivity to ethnocultural determinants of political and social behavior, and reliance on explicit social-science theory and methodology. In what follows, I argue that *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* has its roots in Benson’s Popular Front Marxist beliefs, and his decade-long engagement and subsequent disenchantment with American left-wing politics. Benson’s growing alienation from Progressive historical paradigms and traditional Marxist analysis, and his attempts to formulate a neo-Marxism attentive to unique American class and political realities, are linked to his involvement with 1940s radical factional politics and his disturbing encounter with internal Communist party racial and ideological tensions in the late 1940s at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Ithaca, New York, at a meeting of the City Committee of the Communist party (CP) held in the fall of 1948, George Cook, a local farmer and active CP member, stood up and warned against nefarious influences he labeled “right opportunism” undermining the party’s downtown branch. Recounting his comrades’ (and his own) transgressions, he singled out a young Cornell history doctoral student named Lee Benson as most responsible for encouraging such tendencies in the branch.

1. My thanks to Peter Eisenstadt, Richard Hamm, Daniel Horowitz, Richard Polenberg, and the various anonymous readers who provided me with insightful and useful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

I want to further sharpen this criticism down to emphasize one comrade in particular, Lee Benson, with the request that the comrade concerned evaluate his own position over the period at least that I have known him, criticize himself, and suggest ways in which he can struggle against this. I level the criticism at this one comrade in particular not because I think the rest of us are by any means spotless, but because I see the position of this comrade as having been increasingly one of leadership and influencing the rest of us in the direction of class collaboration, and of defeatism.²

Several months later, in early 1949, after a series of local Communist party meetings and hearings—a party “trial”—Lee Benson was expelled from the CP.

Today, a half-century after the events outlined above, Lee Benson stands out as one of the founders and most aggressive champions of a historiographical revolution that began to sweep through American universities in the late 1950s and 1960s. The “new political history”—an attempt to apply social-science methods, concepts, and theories to American political history—is no longer “new”; it is now seamlessly imbedded in contemporary practice and theory. But in the 1950s and early 1960s, it constituted a major paradigm shift in the discipline. As numerous scholars have acknowledged, Benson’s *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*—one of several of his research projects focusing on nineteenth-century New York state history³—was a central catalyst in that shift. Historian Allan G. Bogue, for example, called *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* the “great ‘mother book’ of the new political history,” and acknowledged that Benson was one of the first in the field to suggest a “systematic” revision of traditional political history with its emphasis on narrow economic class analysis, narrative arguments, and over-reliance on qualitative research methodologies. Historian Robert Dykstra, who was heavily influenced by Benson (and by Benson’s Cornell classmate, Bogue), noted that there is little doubt that the ethnocultural interpretation of American politics—closely linked to the new political history—derived directly from Benson’s early innovative work on New York political history. Ronald Formisano considered *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* “the most important work of the new political history.”⁴

Benson was one of the earliest American political historians to advocate for the adoption of statistical and social-scientific methods in the study of politics and society and to focus on the ethnic and cultural roots of political conflicts. He

2. Typescript, p.1, attachment to Item 16, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949, New York State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation Report, Non-Criminal Investigations Files, New York State Troopers Files, New York State Archives, Albany, New York. The typescript, CP district organizer Robert Johnston recalled many years later, was removed from his briefcase and photocopied. Phone conversation with Robert Johnston, August 5, 1991. See also Robert C. Johnston interview by Gerald Zahavi, July 25, 1991, tape recording (in author’s possession).

3. Benson concentrated on New York State history in both his M.A. and Ph.D. research. His earliest writings—excluding his historiographic critiques of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard—were all focused on New York. See Lee Benson, “The New York Farmers’ Rejection of Populism: The Background, 1890–1896,” M.A. Thesis (Columbia University, 1948); *Merchants, Farmers & Railroads: Railroad Regulation and New York Politics, 1850–1887* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955); *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

4. Allan G. Bogue, “Systematic Revisionism and a Generation of Foment in American History,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 21 (1986), 137, 135; See also Allan G. Bogue interview, July 20, 2001, audio recording (in author’s possession); Ronald Formisano, “The Invention of the Ethnocultural Interpretation,” *American Historical Review* 99 (April 1994), 454.

joined a small coterie of scholars who had begun to challenge not only the methodology and epistemology of political history, but also its substantive foci. He and fellow pioneers—such as historians Richard P. McCormick and Samuel P. Hays—were interested in establishing a solid empirical and methodological foundation for the discipline of political history. Though a younger generation of scholars strongly and effectively challenged the “new political history,” with its narrow focus on electoral politics, and argued for seeking out political struggles in wider social and cultural contexts, it was really Benson and his generation, ironically, that prepared the way for their very challengers.⁵ In his early historical writings, Benson took on the then-dominant—though receding—progressive historical establishment, with “its message of ameliorative progress, of populist orators or progressive tribunes defending the people against predatory and conspiratorial business tycoons, and of the emergence of a capitalism purified by regulatory agency.” He contested the work of Charles Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner; fractured binary and unsophisticated notions of class; and began to chart a path to a unique and idiosyncratic neo-Marxist revisionism that he argued would make Marxism “relevant” again by describing social and political realities in advanced capitalist nations like the United States.⁶

To those familiar with Benson’s intellectual journey from the late 1930s through the early 1950s, when the foundations of *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* were first laid—and equally familiar with the trajectory of the Communist party in those years—the parting of ways between Benson and the CP in 1949 was predictable. It marked an ideological separation of two incompatible partners—accompanied with all of the predictable emotion and trauma that such an event carries. Benson recalled years afterward, “It was devastating. I protested bitterly. . . . My whole life—all my friends—were within the party. This was devastating.”⁷ More significant than personal trauma, however, was what the trial and expulsion of Lee Benson from the Communist party represented. The trial of Lee Benson was a culmination of changes that were taking

5. In a 1992 critical retrospective review of *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, historian Daniel Feller noted that “Today even scholars who contest Benson’s conclusions play in his ballpark; they employ, and try to improve, his methods to dispute his results.” Daniel Feller, “Lee Benson and The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy,” *Reviews in American History* 20 (December 1992), 599.

6. Robert Dykstra interview by Gerald Zahavi, May 17, 2000, audio recording (in author’s possession); Formisano, “The Invention of the Ethnocultural Interpretation.” Formisano correctly argues that critics of Benson and Hays have oversimplified and distorted their contributions. On progressive historiography, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 92-97; John Higham, *History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 171-211; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 137-142. On Benson’s attempts to reshape Marxism, see Lee Benson, “Group Cohesion and Social and Ideological Conflict: A Critique of Some Marxian and Tocquevillian Theories,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 16 (June 1973), 741-767; Lee Benson, “Marx’s General and Middle-Range Theories of Social Conflict,” in Robert K. Merton, *et al.*, *Qualitative and Quantitative Social Research: Papers in Honor of Paul F. Lazarsfeld* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 189-209; Lee Benson, “The Mistransference Fallacy in Explanations of Human Behavior,” *Historical Methods* 17 (Summer 1984), 118-131.

7. Lee Benson interview by Gerald Zahavi, November 9, 2001, audio recording (in author’s possession).

place within the American left and its impact on Benson is best viewed as an encapsulating dramatic incident in the life of an important practitioner and innovator in American political history—part of a central narrative of the intellectual history of Cold War America. In it are condensed a complex web of post-World War II intellectual, social, and cultural transformations.

Lee Benson belongs to a generation of ex-Communist American historians and political scientists (Louis Hartz, Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, Robert Fogel, and others) whose scholarship and intellectual projects flowed—in part—out of Marxist social and political debates, agendas, and paradigmatic frameworks—even as they rejected and revised them. Hartz, Hofstadter, and Boorstin were grappling with a central problem that Marx and Engels had in fact earlier confronted: how to treat social conflict within a bourgeois, advanced capitalist society in which legal equality existed. Fogel explored the dynamics of shifts in the mode of production within capitalism (and also became a more fervent promoter and more highly sophisticated practitioner of social-science statistical methods than Benson). The trajectory of Benson's scholarship diverged from those of other ex-Marxists (in fact, Benson never quite considered himself an ex-Marxist but rather a neo-Marxist). Whatever shorthand we use to describe the trajectory of these scholars' work, it is clear that each took a unique path from, and was influenced in different ways by, the encounter with American communism. One of the essential points in what follows is that there is a hidden Marxist intellectual and social history to books such as *The Genius of American Politics*, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, *Time on the Cross*, and *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*—often considered foundation texts of post-World War II American "consensus history" (*Time on the Cross* being a highly idiosyncratic latecomer). To fully understand the place of these works and their authors in American intellectual life, that history needs to be explicated and integrated into analyses of the texts. This essay begins such a reassessment by closely examining the early life and work of Lee Benson.⁸

In the pages that follow I argue that Lee Benson's contributions to the new political history have their roots in his long-standing contact with American Marxism. Few have acknowledged this; none have traced this relationship in detail, nor grounded it in a specific temporal, intellectual, and social context.⁹ I explore, specifically, the unfolding of events and ideas preceding the publication

8. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*. In fact, the way each book and author is "touched" by Marxism differs considerably, as historian Eric Foner has noted, and these differences, too, need to be fully delineated. On the differing ways that ex-Communists addressed the issue of class in America, see Eric Foner, "The Education of Richard Hofstadter," *The Nation* 254 (May 4, 1992), 597-603. See also Lee Benson's emphasis that consensus history is not necessarily conservative history. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 272-276; Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001.

9. See Bogue, "Systematic Revisionism in American History," 142; William G. Shade, "Politics and Parties in Jacksonian America," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 110 (October 1986), 483-507.

of *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* and the fruition of the new political history; in short, I explore *foundations*, not fulfillments. I will focus in detail on two important and related intellectual elements of the new political history, elements that prepared the ground for later developments in the field: the recognition and increasing emphasis on intra-class conflict and its challenge to traditional Marxist notions of class conflict; and the growing sensitivity to ethnocultural determinants of political and social behavior.

What Benson took and left behind from Marxism was in part the product of his social, cultural, and psychological development, and in part a product of the intellectual currents into which he immersed himself. While understanding his Marxist roots is insufficient to understanding his ideas or his contributions to the development of the discipline of political history as now practiced in the United States, it *is* an important current that should not be neglected. This, then, is an attempt to come to grips with one important American political historian's early intellectual voyage from Marxism to extreme neo-Marxist revisionism and social-scientific and ethno-cultural historical paradigms. To do this, we need to begin with Benson's formative years as a scholar and examine his life in the era of the Popular Front, World War II, and the immediate postwar era.

II. "AN INTEREST IN THIRD PARTY MOVEMENTS"

Lee Benson, born in Brooklyn on January 22, 1922, came from a Jewish Russian émigré family, one steeped in socialist politics.¹⁰ His father, a garment manufacturer who went bankrupt during the Great Depression, was a member of the Workmen's Circle (the *Arbeiter Ring*), an important secular Jewish labor fraternal order whose mission included providing sick and death benefits to members and working for social justice and the general liberation of the working class. It actively supported trade unionism and various socialist causes and organizations in the United States and throughout the world.¹¹ Family political influences and early intellectual encounters with progressive writers drew Benson to the left—but not yet to Communism. As a teenager, he attended Samuel J. Tilden High School in Brooklyn, where—he recalled—he had been a “great devotee of Charles A. Beard and his economic interpretation of history.” Though a persistent isolationist and pacifist streak kept Benson cut off from radical classmates at his high school (he recalled editing a student journal, *Peace*), the growing fascist threat in Europe soon drew him closer to the Communist party.¹² His real introduction to Communism and intellectual Marxism came at Brooklyn College. It was there that Benson came into contact with several Marxist professors—Harry

10. His birth name was Leon Benofsky.

11. The organization was founded in 1892 and reorganized into a national order in 1900. Its original social base was in Harlem and in Brooklyn, but after 1900 it spread widely to Jewish communities throughout New York and far beyond. By 1910, it had close to 39,000 members. It was intimately involved in helping build garment industry unions, particularly the ILGWU. For information on the Workmen's Circle, see Judah J. Shapiro, *The Friendly Society: A History of the Workmen's Circle* (New York: Media Judaica, 1970); Maximilian Hurwitz, *The Workmen's Circle: Its History, Ideals, Organization and Institutions* (New York: The Workmen's Circle, 1936).

12. Lee Benson interview by Gerald Zahavi, October 4, 2001, audio recording (in author's possession).

Marks, Howard Selsam, Harry Slochower, and others—many of whom became victims of the New York State legislature's Rapp-Coudert Committee in 1940–1941. The committee, appointed by the New York State Legislature, identified and interrogated suspected Communists teaching at New York public schools, including state-funded colleges. Dozens of teachers were dismissed.¹³ Benson also joined Tau Alpha Omega, the College's "radical fraternity," populated by a large Young Communist League (YCL) contingent.¹⁴

Following the abrupt termination of the Nazi–Soviet Pact with the invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany on June 22, 1941, Benson was drawn even closer to his fraternity brothers' politics—though he was not yet ready to join the CP. He had been attending a study group with his YCL friends, including one who was an ardent member of the organization; they met regularly through the summer and fall of 1941. On December 7, following the announcement of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Benson and three or four of his friends met once again for one of their regular study sessions; as he recalled, "I joined the YCL then and there." From that moment on, he and his friends became committed to the anti-fascist struggle and "preventing the destruction of the Soviet Union."¹⁵

When Benson entered the American Communist party, he entered an organization very different from the Stalinist organization of the early or mid-1930s; this is an important point, related very much to his later break with the Party. Anti-Fascist, Popular Front thinking—emphasizing social-democratic values, cooperation with a variety of progressive political groups, and cross-class alliances—was quickly softening the party's ideological rigidity (as it had in the years preceding the Nazi–Soviet Pact). In a series of patriotic gestures, designed to promote greater home front unity during the War, the CP began to de-radicalize itself. By 1943, for example, the Young Communist League was transformed into the reformist American Youth for Democracy (AYD) and the following year the party itself was extinguished as Earl Browder, head of the CPUSA, changed the organization into a "Political Association."¹⁶ Benson thus entered a party disposed to ideological and organizational flexibility.

13. David M. Voss, "The Rapp-Coudert Investigation and the Secret Lives of Academic Communists at New York's Public Colleges" (M.A. Thesis, State University of New York at Albany, Department of History, 1996); Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 75–82, 170–172, 285, 306; {au: First Name?} Gettleman, "Communists in Higher Education: C.C.N.Y. and Brooklyn College on the Eve of the Rapp-Coudert Investigation, 1935–1939," paper presented at the 70th Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Atlanta, Georgia, 1977; "Rehearsal for McCarthyism: The New York State Rapp-Coudert Committee and Academic Freedom, 1940–41," paper presented at the 97th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, D.C., 1997; Stephen Leberstein, "Purging the Profs: The Rapp Coudert Committee in New York, 1940–1942," in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, ed. Michael E. Brown *et al.* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993).

14. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Benson claimed that about 80% of the members of Tau Alpha Omega were also YCL members. He also recalled: "Our rivals were the City College YCL and it was our boast that we were by far better organized and much more influential than the City College YCL." After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, YCL membership at Brooklyn College rose to around 250–300, according to Benson.

15. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Benson became active not only in the YCL, but also in the American Student Union.

16. Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 97–98.

Benson's first real encounter with off-campus party organizing came in the summer of 1942, when he and a fellow YCL member went to work on a Vermont farm for the Volunteer Land Corps, an organization that placed young people on farms to labor in support of the war effort. There he first experienced the "rural proletariat," who, Benson recalled,

couldn't have been more reactionary and right-wing. I remember now with self-mocking amusement my trying to persuade the farm hands that they were exploited rural proletariat and should join with the radical movement to overcome their oppression, and being greeted by reactions . . . three hundred degrees to the right of the most right-wing kind of reactionaries. My contact with the rural workers and farmers was three hundred percent rugged individualism.

The memory of that encounter would come back to Benson when he turned to the study of the Populist movement at Columbia University in 1947.¹⁷

In the fall of 1942, Benson received his anticipated draft notice, took leave of Brooklyn College, and went into the military. He spent around three-and-a-half years in the army—from November 1942 until his discharge in June of 1946—serving part of that time in an infantry unit in Europe. While in the army he and several of his former Brooklyn College YCL friends formed the Veterans Against Discrimination (VAD), which began as an organization fighting anti-Semitism but quickly expanded into an anti-racist organization devoted to overcoming discrimination against black soldiers and veterans in and outside the military. The group kept in close touch with the CP, working with the Veterans Section of the now Communist Political Association. When he returned from Europe, Benson's infantry unit was dissolved; he was given a fifty-day leave and then told to report to an army regiment based at Camp Swift in Austin, Texas. There, Benson met his future wife, Eugenia, a student at the University of Texas at Austin. She, too, was a member of the CP, having been drawn to radicalism through an early undergraduate encounter with a popular Christian socialist minister at the Texas State College for Women in Denton, Texas (now known as Texas Woman's University).¹⁸

Unlike many veteran party members whose isolation from party culture eroded their ideological commitments, Benson returned with a vengeance to political activism upon his discharge. He recalled, "I was a two hundred percent red-hot Communist whose life was organized around the party." He continued to work with the Veterans Section of the Party—but not for long. Personal animosities with members of that section led him into a trade union unit active in a New York iron workers local.¹⁹ Benson's "two hundred percent red-hot" communism was soon to be tested. When he took up full-time organizing in late 1946, the party Benson belonged to was no longer the party he entered in 1941. Earl Browder had been pushed out of power in mid-1945 and expelled from the party in February of 1946. William Z. Foster and Eugene Dennis took charge of the

17. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001.

18. *Ibid.*; Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001.

19. Klehr and Haynes, *The American Communist Movement*, 108; Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Because his father had recovered economically from bankruptcy during the war and his family had become financially secure, it was possible for Benson to continue being a volunteer party operative.

CPUSA and began purging it of all vestiges of "Browderism" and related Popular Front tendencies.²⁰ These changes led Benson to doubt his decision to continue working for the party. He recalled:

My disillusion with the American [Communist] party to organize the American people in a progressive movement was very sorely tried. I became convinced that the rigidity of the Communist party and the continuing parroting of out-of-date Marxist slogans about the working class and the revolutionary proletariat . . . bore absolutely no relationship . . . to any world I had known. I had been in the American army for four years and the idea of a class-conscious proletariat seemed to me to be one of the more absurd notions of that.²¹

Benson may have overstated his disenchantment with the party when he uttered these words a half-century later, but that he was frustrated with his work in the CP is *undoubtedly* true. That was why he took his wife's advice to go back to school, finish his degree, and "become a historian." In January of 1947, Benson returned to Brooklyn College. Obtaining "a huge number of credits" for his activities in the Army, he graduated in the summer of 1947 and began study for his M.A. degree at Columbia University in the fall of 1947.

It was at Columbia that Benson began to work out ideas that would shape his critique of progressive political historiography and his contributions to the new political history. He studied with John Allen Krout and Harold J. Carman (the latter was also Dean of the college at the time). With Krout's urging, Benson began to pursue the study of New York Populism for his M.A. thesis. In part, he did so because of his engagement with the growing Progressive party movement in New York City.²² Though Benson had given up his CP organizing activities in 1947, he was still an enrolled party member and was very strongly committed to the Progressive party and its candidate Henry Wallace—whom the Communists strongly backed. After many months of speculation, in December of 1947, Wallace, former Vice President and Secretary of Agriculture under FDR, had declared that he would run for President under a new party. The Progressive party represented much of what Benson strongly believed in—a political party with a popular candidate that was upholding and promoting an expansion of the New Deal legislative agenda and that was strongly critical of anti-Soviet, Cold War politics. The debate over the prospects and sources of support for Wallace informed and inspired Benson's research agenda—if only indirectly. It became an important catalyst for Benson to think about the power of third parties in America—especially about their potential base in urban areas. As he recalled, "it was in terms of getting support for the Wallace campaign," that he began to reflect on the role of third parties in American politics in general.²³

20. Klehr and Haynes, *The American Communist Movement*, 102-109; Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 107-152.

21. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001.

22. J. A. Krout had written a classic work on a conservative mass social movement, prohibition, which, in a way, anticipated and prepared the ground for re-examination of the Populist movement by critics of progressive history—including his student, Benson. See J. A. Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1925). I want to thank Richard Hamm for calling my attention to this book.

23. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Benson continued to stay loyal to the Progressive party well into the early 1950s. In a letter to Paul Gates, written in 1952, Benson, then at Columbia in a teaching position, wrote, "Columbia is really fiercely engaged in the election, particularly the History department which is all out for Stevenson. Matter of fact, Hofstadter is really running the campaign

In Benson's research on the New York Populists, one can recognize the growing questions that he posed to then "orthodox" notions of rural class formation and radicalism. "I never took seriously the idea of Western radicalism. . . . The idea that radicalism was the product of the Midwest and the frontier always seemed silly to me since there wasn't anything remotely like the radicalism that I knew in New York City and that seemed to me to be so endemic in urban areas."²⁴ Benson also felt that "the role of the northeastern farmer in relation to Populism had been largely ignored," that it was "impossible to achieve a full-rounded treatment of Populism, if the agrarian sections which spurned Populism are not carefully analyzed." Since New York farmers did indeed spurn Populism, he chose New York as his research starting point. His completed M.A. thesis, titled "The New York Farmers' Rejection of Populism: The Background, 1890–1896," clearly demonstrated his desire to understand regional and occupational differentiation in what had been considered a single, unified social and class movement. Already, Benson was anticipating his call to re-work Marx's mid-range theory, which later he would argue would make Marx relevant to understanding U. S. history. In 1950, in a letter to University of Kansas historian James C. Malin, Benson described his intellectual journey in those years in yet more detail:

When I began my M.A. at Columbia, I set out to run down what might be termed, in Walter P. Webb's words, "Northern Imperialism"—really Northeastern economic domination. First did it exist; to what extent, when? Second, if so, why, and how did it come about? Third, if so, what were the consequences—political, social, cultural, etc? This tied in with an interest in third party movements as sectional or regional manifestations, and a further interest in the period 1865–1900. . . . Several factors combined to have the M.A. deal with the rejection of Populism by New York farmers, 1890-1896.²⁵

Benson was specifically interested in the behavior of eastern farmers who, though seemingly facing economic and social problems common to their brethren in the West and Midwest, acted differently politically. He was frustrated with the inadequacy of merely understanding "the economic basis underlying Populism's failure" in New York State. In early 1948, he wrote to historian Paul W. Gates, a Cornell professor and an expert on the history of United States public land policy, "Essentially what I'm now searching for is information on the political, social, cultural and intellectual development of the New York farmer which bears on his relation to Populism." What Benson found in his M.A.

on campus, and my other office mate is one of his chief lieutenants." When pressured to sport a Stevenson button, Benson refused. When questioned point blank if he was an Eisenhower supporter, he told his inquisitors "I was voting Progressive." He told Gates, "I haven't the remotest intention of getting involved in political discussions, nor do I have the time to spare, but I'll be damned if I conceal my choice when asked." Lee Benson to Paul W. Gates, October 9, 1952, folder 18, box 1, Paul Wallace Gates Papers, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

24. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001.

25. Lee Benson to Paul W. Gates, January 20, 1948, folder 18, box 1, Paul W. Gates Papers. Lee Benson to James C. Malin, May 7, 1950, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas. My thanks to Allan G. Bogue for revealing to me the existence of the Benson–Malin correspondence.

research were important internal conflicts *within* an agrarian class previously considered homogeneous. "It wasn't that Eastern farmers were necessarily more conservative than Western farmers," he summarized, "it was that their self interest" came into conflict with that of western wheat farmers who "were mainly concerned about cheap transportation [and] cheap money, in order to, in fact, become small-scale land speculators." Benson's sharpening sensitivity to divergences in local and regional economies—and their political and social implications—already demonstrated his hesitation to accept *general* deterministic explanations for group behavior and his intellectual distancing from Marxist ideas about class. Influenced by Lenin's work on colonialism, Benson further observed in his M.A. thesis that "Populist ideology was largely native agrarian, and narrow in outlook" and "it reflected the sectional conflicts in philosophy and interests between the imperialist and semi-colonial regions, and to a much lesser extent, between the South and West." He concluded his thesis:

The New York farmer was gravely affected by the international agrarian crisis of the late nineteenth century. But primarily as a result of the uneven development of capitalist economy in the United States, his problems stemming from this crisis, took on a different form from those plaguing Western and Southern farmers. The Populist movement, arising in the West and South, therefore appeared to be addressed to problems quite different from his own. At some points it was definitely hostile to his immediate best interests, and he tended to regard competition from those regions as greater threats to his prosperity and security than he did the growing domination of Northern finance capital. Further, the particular social climate surrounding him has instilled some attitudes, and reinforced others, which were clearly antagonistic to the social philosophy embodied in the Populist movement.²⁶

Though his ideas were not yet polished and he had yet to come under the influence of James C. Malin, at the University of Kansas, or Gates at Cornell, Benson was already complicating Marxist notions of social and class conflict.

A few years later, at Cornell, Benson's ideas would be more fully developed and finally published as chapters four and five of *Merchants, Farmers & Railroads*, where he argued that regional differentiation in farming led to divergent economic and political interests. "American farmers," Benson wrote, "were not a homogeneous class and one would normally expect different sectional (or regional) responses to spring from the fundamentally different conditions of daily life." He further highlighted the fractured and localized nature of the New York Grange, pointing out "the practical difficulties of welding together the diverse masses of individualistic, suspicious, jealous, narrowly opinionated New York farmers." This emphasis on intra-class divisions had their roots in Benson's M.A. thesis research and in his interest in the divergent paths of rural political activism as they applied to third-party formation. Benson's arguments and conclusions—in his M.A. thesis and in *Merchants, Farmers & Railroads*—demonstrate his growing rejection of orthodox Marxist notions of class, which he believed inadequate for describing the roots of American social and political con-

26. Benson, "The New York Farmers' Rejection of Populism: The Background," 107, 122.

flicts.²⁷ This dissatisfaction with orthodox Marxist notions of class laid the foundation for Benson's break with institutional Marxism in 1949 and his dramatic rethinking of Marx's middle-level theories in the following decades.

III. "TO TRACK DOWN AND SLAY MONSTERS WAS POLITICALLY REWARDING": THE TRIAL OF LEE BENSON²⁸

In 1948, upon the completion of his M.A. thesis, Benson—accompanied by his wife, Eugenia—came to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He chose Cornell for three reasons: he was encouraged to do so by Columbia historian and Dean Harold J. Carman; he was aggressively courted by Paul Gates and drawn to his interdisciplinary approach to the study of history (Gates was then serving as chair of the History Department); and he was attracted by the rich manuscript and monograph collections of Cornell's Regional History library, then administered by Edith Fox.²⁹

From the start Benson and Gates developed a close, but often contentious, relationship. Gates recalled, "Lee Benson used to come in and argue with me by the hour, by the day almost. And it was good for me and I enjoyed it." Benson wrote, "Mr. Gates and I have frequently found ourselves arguing heatedly about subjects concerning which we are in substantial agreement. I was his assistant last year and that was quite a common occurrence."³⁰ Benson found in Ithaca more than academic and intellectual stimulation; upon his arrival he was almost

27. Benson, *Merchants, Farmers & Railroads*, 87, 90. See, in particular, chapters four and five: "The Patrons of Husbandry in New York" and "Rate War and the Farmers' Alliance". Benson stated to me that these two chapters came directly out of his work on the Eastern farmers' rejection of Populism. "The economic conflicts were more intense between farmers in different places and producing different crops than anything else." Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001.

28. "To track down and slay monsters was politically rewarding" comes from Benson's observations about the potency of political rhetoric during the Jacksonian era—specifically to Jacksonian rhetoric in the Bank War of 1832. I have exercised my artistic license in employing it here to describe both McCarthyism and the wars between Stalinists and Popular Fronters in the CP. In its actual textual context it appears as: "As Antimasonry had previously demonstrated, to track down and slay monsters was politically rewarding. It might be conjectured that something in the national character makes Americans more responsive to attacks upon 'evil,' personified in the shape of malignant creatures or institutions, than to attacks upon 'error,' in the form of abstract principles." Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 52.

29. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001; Gates served as Chair from 1946 to 1956. In his first year at Cornell, Benson replaced Allan G. Bogue as Gates's teaching assistant (Bogue was on his way to Kansas to conduct his doctoral research at the University of Kansas under James C. Malin). Bogue recalled sitting in the library and being introduced to Benson by Gates: "He's going to take your place as my teaching assistant next year," Gates told him. And so he did. Gates was a powerful influence over many young graduate students. Allan Bogue recalled that Gates: "was gruff, overbearing, but underneath it all he really had a very good heart, and he was liberal, if not radical." Allan G. Bogue interview by Gerald Zahavi, July 20, 2001; Lee Benson to Paul W. Gates, January 20, Feb. 22, 1948, folder 18, box 1, Paul W. Gates Papers; Gates placed a great emphasis on using local and regional records—on empirical research. Gates's students heavily exploited Cornell's Regional History Collection and Edith Fox, who administered the collection, was viewed as "kind of a godmother" according to Allan Bogue. Bogue interview.

30. Paul W. Gates interview by Gould Colman, March 20, 1980 session (Transcript – part of a series), p. 117, collection 16-6-2010, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library. Colman was Cornell University Archivist at the time; Lee Benson to James C. Malin, March 6, 1950, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Papers.

immediately swept up into the whirlwind of local radical and Progressive party politics.

With the Cold War heating up, Henry Wallace, former Secretary of Commerce and former Vice President, called for a conciliatory policy toward Russia; in response to the intransigence and growing bellicosity of the Truman administration, he declared his candidacy for president in 1948. The Progressive party was formed to nominate him and throughout the country, state organizations emerged to support the new national party. Benson's new intellectual mentor, Gates, was treasurer of the recently formed New York State Progressive party and the Henry Wallace for President Committee, and a delegate to the 1948 Philadelphia Convention of the Progressive party. The Wallace campaign was in full swing on campus and downtown, and Benson quickly got involved in it.³¹ He also promptly reestablished his ties to the Communist party. At least three CP branches, including the "Lincoln Steffens Club," which published a mimeographed on-campus newsletter (ingenuously titled *The Newsletter*), as well as an Ithaca City CP Coordinating Committee, a Marxist study group (headed by future economic historian Robert Fogel), the Socialist League for Industrial Democracy, the Young Progressive Citizens of America, and the American Youth for Democracy were active at Cornell and in the city.³² That Benson decided to affiliate once again with a party unit suggests that whatever doubts he may have had about the efficacy of Communist organizing, they were not strong enough to hold back his hunger for activism.

Radical politics at Cornell in the late 1940s and early 1950s caused no shortage of headaches for the Cornell University administration, which was operating under Cold War pressures from both the Federal Government and its alumni. The threat of embarrassing House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) or

31. Paul W. Gates file, case 219, box 8, New York State Non-Criminal Investigation Files; *Daily Worker* (April 5, May 6, 1948); See the numerous documents in the Political and Civil Liberties Miscellany Collection, #1009, at Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University for documentation on Gates's involvement with the Henry Wallace Campaign. This collection, donated by Gates, includes clippings, pamphlets, flyers, and printed articles concerning national politics, the 1948 presidential election, and civil liberties. See also Paul Wallace Gates interview by Gould Colman, March 20, 1980 session; Paul Gates's students Allan and Margaret Bogue recalled: "Usually Gates contented himself with casting his ballot as a registered Democrat, but deviated, however, in 1948. That year, he threw himself enthusiastically into the 'Henry Wallace for President' movement and was named treasurer of its New York state party. But he was frustrated by the degree of influence that, he believed, Communists exercised at the national convention. Steadfastly opposing action that would deprive any Americans of their constitutional rights, he came increasingly thereafter to believe that the Communists were perverting American progressivism to their own ends." Paul W. Gates, *The Jeffersonian Dream: Studies in the History of American Land Policy*, ed. Allan G. and Margaret Beattie Bogue (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), xix.

32. *Cornell Daily Sun* (May 17, 1947), 3; (March 24, 1948), 1; (April 16, 1948), 3; (May 1, 1948), 2; Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001; *The Newsletter* vol. 2, no. 3 in Political and Civil Liberties Miscellany Collection, #1009; Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 87, 89. See also the following correspondence cited by Ellen Schrecker: E. E. Day to Fred F. Bontecou, March 11, 1947, 5-028, #3/6/8, Day Papers. Robert Fogel to F. C. Baldwin, Nov. 3, 1947; Baldwin to Fogel, Nov. 6, 1947; Fogel to Baldwin, Jan. 8, 1948; Rubin Diamond to Baldwin, Jan. 10, 1948 in Dean of Students Files, #37/1/855, Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; Ellen Schrecker interview with Robert William Fogel, June 2, 1978 (notes in Ellen Schrecker's possession). I want to thank Schrecker for giving me access to her notes on this interview.

Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations hearings (the latter was Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's inquisitorial forum) focusing on Cornell was something that the administration sought to avoid at all costs. So much pressure was being placed on university administrators that in 1949, though Cornell's president Edmund E. Day had refused a HUAC request for a list of textbooks used in social-science courses, the university nonetheless went ahead and established a secret faculty "Subcommittee on Academic Problems Arising from Governmental Investigation."³³ Day also had to continually attend to incensed alumni writing to complain about the University's tolerance of radicals. He wrote to one angry alum: "We are watching its progress [the American Youth for Democracy campus chapter]—or rather its lack of progress—with interest And I am confident that it will never become necessary for us to confer upon its members the dignity of martyrdom."³⁴

There were also the constant flare-ups that had to be put down whenever a radical or Communist speaker came to the campus to speak, and there was the issue of controversial faculty members, like Philip Morrison, to contend with. Morrison, who had worked on the development of the Atomic Bomb at Los Alamos and afterwards aligned himself with pro-disarmament and left-wing political causes, was a major embarrassment for Cornell. His outspokenness aroused the ire of many alums and faculty—and put the university under the scrutiny of federal agents. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and its local field agents extensively monitored the campus and numerous informants had infiltrated local radical groups.³⁵

The FBI was not the only group that kept a watchful eye on radicals at Cornell and in Ithaca. The State Police, too, had a coterie of informants and detectives in the area. Lee Benson's activities, for example, were carefully monitored. His long-distance calls were fastidiously logged and traced. In one humorous case, State Police detectives interviewed local mail carriers and a postmistress only to discover that the family with whom Benson was corresponding were in fact of interest to him only because they had preserved the "written letters and records left by a great-great-grandfather . . . which were written in the year 1836 in respect to the Federal Militia."³⁶ State and federal undercover agents and informants fastidiously recorded every detail of the activities of local radicals. A Cornell Law School student, John Edward Marquese, a member of the local CP branch

33. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 181.

34. Quoted in Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 87. Cornell University was also starting to become cautious in its hiring decisions. See Pauli Murray's account of her attempts to obtain a job at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell in 1952 in Pauli Murray, *The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 295-297. I want to thank Professor Richard Hamm for bringing Murray's account to my attention.

35. Ellen Schrecker has more than adequately covered this and related subjects in her *No Ivory Tower*, and there is no need to rehash her account here—although I offer a few Cornell-related observations below. See Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 91, 110, 174, 181, 200, 217, 272-277; see also Ellen Schrecker interview with Phillip Morrison, December 22, 1977 (audio recording, Columbia Oral History Program; notes, Ellen Schrecker). I want to thank Schrecker for giving me access to this interview and her notes on it.

36. January 18, 1950 report, Item 3, Case 304, box 9, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files.

from 1948 until 1951, testified in detail before the House Un-American Activities Committee in New York during the summer of 1953 and again in April of 1954 before the State House Un-American Activities Subcommittee meeting in Albany.³⁷

The CP branch that Benson entered was a small one, made up of around a dozen "hill" (Cornell students and employees) and community members—including a local attorney and head of the Ithaca Bartender's Union. It was heavily involved in organizing activities in downtown Ithaca, a city nearing a population of 30,000 by the late 1940s (it had grown by almost 50% in the previous decade).³⁸ By 1948, community and campus CP units had become much more important in the party than shop units. The latter had grown increasingly isolated and ineffective due, in part, to the passage of the Taft-Hartley Labor Act with its anti-communist provisions, and to hostile trade union reactions to communist third-party activities. In Ithaca, local communists were deeply engaged in campaign activities in support of the Progressive party candidates Henry Wallace and vice-presidential candidate Glen H. Taylor, as well as Carl Golden, American Labor party (ALP) candidate for the State Assembly from the district. They were also engaged in campaigns against the European Recovery Plan, compulsory military service, the Mundt-Nixon Bill (HR 5852 required the registration of Communist Party members and Communist-front organizations), and "race" work—especially advocating for equal economic opportunities for the city's approximately 800 African American residents, most of them poor and living in the south and west end of downtown Ithaca.³⁹

The campus party organizations included both students and Cornell employees. One Cornell party unit, the Lincoln Steffens Club, was composed mainly of students (with perhaps a couple of faculty members). It included Cornell engineering student Paul Robeson Jr. (son of the actor and singer Paul Robeson), James Weinstein (co-founder of *Studies on the Left* and future editor of the socialist weekly *In These Times*), and Robert F. Fogel (the future Nobel Prize winning economic historian). Robeson was a record-breaking high jumper at Cornell, head of the membership committee of the Students for Wallace organization on campus, and a member of the New York State Progressive Party exec-

37. *Cornell Daily Sun* (April 8, 1954), 1.

38. *Ibid.* John Edward Marquess identified twenty-two individuals who had been CP members in Ithaca during his own years of membership in the party and proceeded to name them. Marquess had been a member of a cell on campus, and later joined a unit in the city to which other students belonged. He testified that he had heard that another cell existed among the faculty but had no direct knowledge of it. He also spoke about the America Labor Party, which, he said, was "heavily infiltrated by Communists and whose policies were identical to the Communist Party." The ALP, according to Marquess, was deemed "the best vehicle for the public expression of Communist activities in the city." Steinhart, one of the members named by Marquess, had been cited as a formed communist before HUAC, and was dismissed from his position as a University librarian. The University claimed he was being dismissed "because of inefficiency and inability to work with his colleagues, not because of political tendencies." *Cornell Daily Sun* (April 8, 1954), 1; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1950, Volume II: Characteristics of the Population, Part 32: New York* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), 32-18, 32-93.

39. *Cornell Daily Sun* (March 22, 1948), 1; (April 6, 1948), 7; (April 8, 1954), 1; (May 1, 1948), 2; (May 26, 1948), 8; (Dec. 7, 1948), 1; Case 304, box 9, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files.

utive committee. Weinstein joined the AYD and was especially active in the Progressive party and in the Young Progressives on campus. Fogel was the chairman of Cornell's Marxist Discussion Group and, after graduating from Cornell in 1948, became a member of the National Student Commission of the U.S. Communist Party.⁴⁰

Reflecting their sensitivity to black discrimination (strengthened during World War II) CP branches had begun to aggressively pursue anti-racism campaigns in the late 1940s—in Ithaca, throughout the Southern Tier region of New York (embracing Broome, Tioga, Tompkins, and Schuyler counties), and across the state and nation.⁴¹ When Benson entered the Ithaca party, Robert C. Johnston was serving as section organizer of the entire Southern Tier of New York and Executive Secretary of the Broome County Communist party. That territory had a total party membership of around 162 in the late 1940s. In 1946–1947, the section's—and Johnston's—main focus was on the industrial cities of Binghamton, Johnson City, and Endicott in Broome County (approximately forty-five miles to the southeast of Ithaca), but he made regular trips to adjacent Tioga and Tompkins County, visiting the CP's two other regional “concentration” points: Spencer (with its radical Finnish farmers, most of whom had migrated there from Michigan) and Ithaca. Though political activities of the party were on the rise, membership had begun to decline in the years following 1945. The 162 figure

40. *Cornell Daily Sun* (May 26, 1948), 8; (Dec. 7, 1948), 1; *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970*, ed. Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 113–114 [Interview with James Weinstein]. Paul Robeson Jr. was also an active member of the campus AYD. *Cornell Daily Sun* (May 17, 1947), 12; Robert W. Fogel interview by Ellen Schrecker, June 2, 1978 (notes in Schrecker's possession). For additional membership information on the CP, see Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Extensive information on Cornell campus political activities in 1948 through 1950 are available in Civil Liberties Miscellany, 1948–1950, Collection #1009; See also *Cornell Daily Sun* (May 10, 14, 15, 18, 19, 1949). Wallace and his local supporters, socialists and communists, consistently attacked the Mundt–Nixon Bill on campus and in the community.

41. I've described one of these already. See Gerald Zahavi, “Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Community at Schenectady General Electric, 1930–1954,” *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996), {au: p. nos.?.}. At the time, the broader Southern Tier party organization had been concentrating its work on the Endicott Johnson factories in Broome County. With the defeat and departure of a communist-headed union, the International Fur and Leather Workers Union (IFLWU), the party turned aggressively to community organizing. On the Endicott Johnson union campaigns, see chapter 7 of my book, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoemakers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890–1950* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Evidence of the party's shifting emphasis on racism and anti-discrimination campaigns can be found in Broome County radio broadcasts over station WENE-FM in Binghamton, paid for by the Communist party. Though the party continued to target its messages to Endicott Johnson workers—as it had in previous years—now it did so more aggressively and specifically to the black community, concentrating in the 7th Ward of Binghamton. One broadcast, aired on Tuesday, October 11, 1949, posed the following questions to the radio audience: “Why is it that unemployment is 2 to 3 times higher among the Negro people than among the white? Why is it that Negroes are virtually barred from every large industry in the Triple Cities? Why is it that E-J employs only 2 Negroes among 18,000 workers? It's the same old answer—profits. Keep the Negro people down, living in poverty. Use them as a threat to lower the wages of all workers. Keep Negroes and white divided—that's the sure way to keep out the unions. And no unions mean low wages and high profits.” WENE radio broadcast, October 11, 1949. Attachment to Confidential Investigation report, Nov. 3, 1949, item 14, case 230, New York State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation Report, Non-Criminal Investigations Files. See also Robert Johnston, “Shortchanges Negro, Italian Youngsters,” *The [Sunday] Worker* (July 23, 1950), 11, about recreational discrimination in Binghamton. It described allocation of recreational spaces in the 7th Ward of Binghamton—a heavily black and Italian ward.

noted earlier represented a drop from the World War II years' high of 214. The decline reflected not only the growing repression and isolation of the party in the post-War period, but also the growth of party infighting.⁴²

In 1948, mainly because of a shifting party agenda, internal tensions rose dramatically in party branches and led to numerous confrontations. Internal battles took many forms—some personal, some political—but most commonly, they were waged between adherents of Popular Front politics and hard-line Stalinists. Such clashes were serious enough to dissolve many party units. In Ithaca, tensions sometimes manifested themselves in divisions between "town" and agrarian Communists and "gown" reds—or academic radicals. George Cook, a fire-brand party Stalinist who had a farm in nearby Alpine, New York (in Schuyler County)—along with section head Robert Johnston—took an especially active role in Ithaca enforcing a resurgent Stalinist hard line. He and Johnston waged a persistent battle to isolate and purge so-called "bourgeois collaborationists" from the party in the late 1940s.⁴³ Lee Benson was one of their targets.

The confrontation between Cook, Johnston, and Benson in the fall and winter of 1948 and 1949—and its significance for understanding the evolution of Benson's intellectual development—may have been lost to history had not the New York State police secretly gained access to and examined the contents of a briefcase belonging to Johnston. The Bureau of Non-Criminal Investigations of the New York State Police photocopied the contents of the briefcase and returned it to its original location, a diner where Johnston has inadvertently left it. As one police detective report noted, "The manner in which these papers were received must be considered confidential and the originals are no longer available." The contents of the briefcase included data on Communist party membership in the Southern Tier of New York State (already cited), and several summaries of Ithaca City Communist party committee meetings. The latter detailed the beginnings of a rift that was then tearing the local party organization apart, a rift that ultimately led to the expulsion of eight members of the local party—including Benson.

42. D. M. McGranaghan report, December 1, 1949, Item 15, Case 230, New York State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation Report, Non-Criminal Investigations Files. A state police report contained a full breakdown of the social makeup of the party organization: it included 38 students, 10 teachers, 1 professor [probably an undercount], 6 shopkeepers, 29 housewives, 20 farmers, 31 industrial workers, and 6 organizers; For an account of Southern Tier organizing preceding Johnston's years, see Bernard Burton's unpublished autobiography in box 1, Bernard Burton Papers, Manuscript Collections, University at Albany, State University of New York; Bernard Burton interview by Gerald Zahavi, March 12, 1991, audio recording (in author's possession); on the Spencer communists, see: Neil Riker, "Spencer and the Finnish Experience, 1911–1980," unpublished research paper, SUNY Binghamton, 1980; George A. McGonigal, "Finnish-American Immigrant Workers and Institutions; An Overview (1890–1925); and a Case Study (1918–1953)," unpublished seminar paper, Cornell University, 1985.

43. George Washington Cook File, box 8, case #257, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files. Cook was tracked by the State Police from 1949 until 1958. He edited a small monthly paper for the New York State Farm Council and also occasionally wrote for the CP's *Sunday Worker* (Farm Front). He had close connections to radical dairy farmers in the Catskills, especially Fred Briehl, and to communist activists in the Ithaca area. For more on the prominent presence of George Cook in Southern Tier CP activities, see *Binghamton Press*, March 17, 1950 ("Jeers, Sneers, Indifference Greet Communists in Police-Escorted Loudspeaker Street Tour"); Robert Johnston interview by Gerald Zahavi, July 25, 1991.

Though Johnston got his briefcase back, he long ago lost track of its original contents.⁴⁴ Fortunately, the state police carefully preserved their photocopies.

The documents that have survived offer a unique, detailed, and intimate look at local CP tensions in 1948 and 1949. They help explain not only why Benson left the CP in early 1949, but the full dimensions of the ideological rifts that fractured his and other party units throughout the country. It is clear from meeting minutes and summaries that Cook, Johnston, and other comrades were continually accusing Benson of “right opportunism.” For several months, however, he effectively defended himself, obtaining the support of his comrades. Yet by early November of 1948, Cook had compiled a thorough case against Benson and had brought the matter not to the local downtown unit—Benson’s unit—but to the broader City Committee. At a meeting of the Committee, he listed his essential charge: that Benson had attempted to shape the Citizens against Discrimination (CAD), a local left-initiated civil rights organization, into a broad but “bourgeois-dominated” liberal-led association. Benson, Cook further elaborated, sought to keep the American Labor party out of the organization, and to involve “prominent” individuals in its leadership, individuals who would help transform it into a state-recognized “community council.” Cook and Johnston (who was present at this City Committee meeting), felt that such a “community council” would be easily co-opted and transformed into a propaganda tool for New York State Governor Thomas E. Dewey and his administration. It would cease to be “a force for mobilizing the Negro people with others in an active fight on job discrimination.”⁴⁵

The debate within the City Committee exposed the conflicting choices facing the party: seek state recognition, broad support, and institutional legitimacy or build a “mass” organization dominated by the CP and the ALP. The first choice was a clear manifestation of Popular Front thinking, the second, an expression of a reconstituted revolutionary Stalinism. “It is imperative that Lee most especially realize his own weakness,” Johnston declared. “I do see this as a key to our downtown branch as a whole becoming more politically correct.”⁴⁶ The City Committee agreed with Cook and Johnston, concluding “in order to mobilize the Negro people in this struggle, the people *directly* hit by the problem of job discrimination would have to be the major ones involved in the organization.”⁴⁷

Lee and Eugenia Benson had, in fact, originated the idea of establishing the Citizens Against Discrimination. They had worked to create a broad, non-partisan activist organization specifically to combat job discrimination in Ithaca. Benson *had* indeed argued against ALP involvement with the organization because he learned that the presence of Communists in the ALP aroused the hos-

44. Robert C. Johnston Confidential Investigation file, Typescript, p.1, attachment to Item 16, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files; Robert C. Johnston interview, July 25, 1991.

45. Typescript, p. 7, attachment to Item 16, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files. Dewey established the first state agency in the United States to eliminate racial discrimination in employment.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Typescript, p. 3, attachment to Item 16, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files.

tility of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its head, Julius Eastman—whom Benson felt needed to be in the CAD. Eastman wanted to have no part in an organization dominated by the CP. The weak turnout at the organizational meeting of the CAD, held on October 22, 1948—to which only around twenty-six to twenty-eight people showed up—reinforced Benson's skepticism about the party's strategic tack. Benson felt that the CAD would fail to establish itself as a credible civil rights organization and would never gain state recognition unless it built broader alliances, including alliances with liberal faculty at Cornell. He had indeed tried to build such alliances, reporting to the unit about his contacts with various faculty members. For several months Benson was able to gain the support of the branch; members told him to proceed as he saw fit. But Cook first weakly, then strongly, disagreed. That was the background to the November City Committee meeting and Cook and Johnston's attempts to block Benson and discipline him.⁴⁸ Though the Committee had ruled against Benson, this was not the end of the matter. Tensions continued to mount, but the *next* crisis was not specifically about organizational strategies, it was about "white chauvinism."

As Joseph Starobin and several other writers have noted, in the postwar era, the Communist party had begun to engage in a "self-purification" campaign devoted to weeding out all vestiges of racism from its ranks. This campaign was closely linked to party leadership struggles aimed at purging the party of all popular front tendencies associated with Earl Browder and his supporters. In New York, Robert Thompson, head of the State CP, called for an "intensified ideological and political struggle against all forms of [white] chauvinism;" what occurred in Benson's branch, was precisely that.⁴⁹

In late 1948, urged by the section organizer to discuss and purge "white chauvinist" (racist) tendencies within its ranks, Benson's downtown branch resisted. Its resistance led to the establishment of a special Section Committee on White Chauvinism in the Ithaca Branch—to do precisely what the downtown unit refused to do. Cook and Johnston's initial charges against Benson for class collaboration were soon enlarged as an African American couple—members of the local party—brought charges of white chauvinism against Benson and his wife. As one of the Section committee reports noted: "There has been resistance on the part of the branch to any discussion of white chauvinism except on abstract and theoretical terms. There has been reluctance to accept the party's definition of W. Ch. [*sic*] and resistance to calling anything W. Ch. except the most open act of discrimination." Reviewing manifestations of white chauvinism in the branch, the report returned to the previous controversy and identified Lee Benson as hav-

48. Typescript, p. 4, attachment to Item 16, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949; *Cornell Daily Sun* (October 23, 1948), 3 ["New Committee Organizes to Combat Racial Discrimination in Ithaca Area"].

49. Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 201, 199; David A. Shannon, *Decline of American Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 244–247; *Sunday Worker* (July 9, 1948), 4. For additional background on the relationship between Communists and African Americans and the CP's sensitivity to "white chauvinism," see Mark I. Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–36* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998) and Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

ing been the “most vigorous exponent in the CAD matter of having, in the main, white bourgeois leadership.” Specific charges were drawn up against him and seven others in the branch. Four, including Benson and his wife, were recommended for expulsion, the remaining four for “control tasks” (assigned duties related to the accused member’s transgression, to be performed for a designated trial period). The specific charges against Benson read:

That Lee B. has a consistent record in the Ithaca branch of right opportunism. He played the leading role in leading the branch and the Committee Against Discrimination in a right opportunist and white chauvinist line in the struggle for Negro rights. When this was brought to the attention of the branch he refused to accept criticism and, with the aid of a majority of the branch, succeeded in having the matter dropped. In the case of job discrimination against the Negro youth, he took the lead in having the ALP reject their appeal for help, humiliated the Negro youth who came to the ALP meeting, and, in a subsequent party meeting, made the un-Marxist statement that the ALP would give the kiss of death to any cause it supported. He took responsibility with his wife for their refusal to go to the movies with a Negro couple whom the party was attempting to recruit, and rejected any criticism of the Section Organizer for labeling the act as white chauvinism. He had been largely responsible for the fact that the branch has spent 4 fruitless meetings on this subject to the detriment of all other work.⁵⁰

Though there are fascinating details behind every one of the charges (space constrains elaboration), the one that Benson most vividly remembers to this day was the charge that focused on his and his wife’s decision not to socialize with the “Negro couple” that the party had designated for recruitment. Benson answered these charges by saying that he and his wife simply “didn’t like” the couple and hardly knew them—and pointed out that they had “other Negro friends” whom they had entertained in their home.⁵¹ Years later Benson recalled that he and his wife were trying to recruit a black couple living in downtown Ithaca, whom they were fond of, but the section organizer and the City Committee were not interested in their relationship to *that* black couple, but to the couple that the local party hierarchy had designated as desirable recruitment prospects. Benson’s oral recollections confirmed the written record: “[We] just found the party black couple absolutely abhorrent and absolutely refused to go out socially with them.”⁵²

Thus “right opportunism” and “white chauvinism” now figured as the two main charges against Benson. He defended himself, even as he began to avoid meetings. Benson’s typed formal response to accusations against him appears on a sheet that accompanied the last surviving record of hearings held against him and other accused comrades. He wrote that personality differences have “over the past several months prevented the recognition of the basic issues involved and only resulted in emotional displays and outbursts that have been quite detrimental to work.” While he agreed that he had “a good deal of responsibility for these ‘personality’ differences,” he also emphasized that there were fundamental disagreements within the local and the section about the party’s political and

50. C-1 [trooper’s numbering], supplemental attachment, Item 9, Report, Case 230, Box 8, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files.

51. E-2 [trooper’s numbering], supplemental attachment, Item 11, Report, Case 230, Box 8, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949.

52. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001.

racial work. The best contribution he could make, in light of these differences, he suggested, was to stay away from meetings and to let the branch develop an "overall policy . . . which reflects the majority thinking in a calm and orderly manner." He ended by stating that he would be "quite prepared to carry out the steps of the policy adopted . . ." ⁵³ Unfortunately, the record is vague about what happened next; only undated handwritten notes survive. They read, in part: "On struggle in Ithaca: Weakness—not taken up decisively. Result—necessity for expelling 8 instead of 4." ⁵⁴ A statistical CP report on party membership, apparently describing party data for 1950, noted that eight "regular" members of the party left the party in the past year. ⁵⁵ Lee and his wife were two of them. ⁵⁶

Lee Benson's "right opportunism," which Cook defined as "an attempt at class collaboration, under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, and glossing over of the class struggle" was merely a manifestation of Benson's Popular Front beliefs. ⁵⁷ He had never been one to embrace sectarianism or avoid alliances with useful liberal political allies. The charges thus reveal much about the party's *leftward* turn. Benson's Marxism had hardly changed; he had come into the party precisely when its Popular Front spirit was strongest—at the start of World War II—and his understanding of Marxism was closely linked to *that* moment and *that* spirit. His disagreements with party Stalinists was nothing new; as a young scholar, he had already begun to fracture simplistic Marxist notions of class; now he confronted what he considered simplistic and ineffectual party organizers. His activism and disposition were hardly amenable to a Stalinist shift, which was precisely what the Ithaca and other local party units were absorbed in at the time.

What does the trial of Lee Benson have to do with the evolution of Benson's ideas? First, it reveals his political, ideological, and social orientation precisely at a time when he was grappling with intellectual issues pertaining to class and intra-class power relationships, social conflict, and third parties. Second, it anticipates and suggests the basis for his critique of Progressive history and his growing estimation of the importance of ethno-cultural conflict in American history. In his sensitivity to non-class motivations, promotion of cross-class collaboration, and in his first-hand experience of ethno-cultural tensions—in the internal divisions between hill and town/rural communists in Ithaca, between black and white members, between Stalinists and Popular Fronters, and in white chauvinist charges against him—Benson found a radical third-party classroom that would deeply inform his emerging political and historical ideas. He took away from his experiences lessons on how social and cultural tensions can transform a

53. G-1 and G-2 [trooper's numbering], supplemental attachment (Lee Benson's response to party criticisms), Item 12, Report, Case 230, Box 8, Case 230, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files.

54. Report, supplemental - 16, Item 24, Dec. 12, 1949 Case 230, Box 8.

55. Report, attachment, Supplemental - 20, June 10, 1950, Confidential Investigation report, Case 230, Box 8.

56. Years later, Benson recalled his reaction to his and his wife's expulsion: "First of all, I resented bitterly the idea of being a 'white chauvinist' since I had been in the absolute forefront of movements against discrimination in all kinds of different ways but in addition to that, my whole life—all my friends—were within the party." Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001.

57. Typescript, p.5, attachment to Item 16, Case 230, Dec. 1, 1949, Box 8, New York State Troopers Non-Criminal Investigation Files.

third political party. These experiences fed and paralleled intellectual currents already gestating in his mind and ultimately had an impact on his approach to the study of history.

IV. "THIS OUTMODED PRISM"

In the context of CPUSA history, the trial of Lee Benson was merely the final phase of a purging of Popular Front radicalism. In that light, Benson's subsequent academic and intellectual contributions constituted, in a way, one Popular Fronter's counter-attack. We need to recall that Benson joined the Party precisely during an era when the American CPUSA discovered and embraced "Americanism." In essence, Benson's challenge to the primacy of Marxist class-conflict theory was a continuation of his commitment to a vision of interethnic, interracial, and even, to some extent, *inter-class* collaboration in the service of economic egalitarianism, social equality, and broad-based political democracy. When he sought alliances between African-Americans, workers, farmers, and bourgeois intellectuals, he was following his faith in Popular Front struggles.

In part, too, the story of the evolution of Lee Benson's ideas is also the story of the emergence of social-science history from Popular Front thinking—the story of the growing challenges of social, cultural, and intellectual explanatory theories to progressive and Marxist class explanations for social change. It is the tale of generational conflict both *within* and *outside* the American left. In a recent interview, Benson—now over eighty years old—condemned "the rigidity" with which American leftist historians and social scientists "still cling to the absurdity of Marx's errors on the working class in capitalist society." He found their analyses of American history, their "absolute inability to examine reality other than through this outmoded prism"—the prism of Marx's notion of class—made "no sense whatsoever."⁵⁸ But those who would take this statement and a cursory reading of his work and neatly label and cast Benson into the dustbin of history—as merely another consensus historian generated by Cold War America—might do well to pay closer attention to what really lies behind these words.

In the years following the Ithaca trial, from 1949 until 1961—at Cornell, Harvard, Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research, studying location theory with economist Walter Isard, working with Paul Lazarsfeld, Ernest Nagel, and Robert Merton—Lee Benson continued to engage Marxist theory, though not always frontally. His earlier approach to Populism was inspired in part by a Leninist-stimulated interest in geography and imperialism (encouraged also by southern and western historians' embrace of the idea of "internal colonialism," perhaps best associated with C. Vann Woodward's work on the post-Civil War south). "You know," he recalled, "so much of American historiography of that time was influenced by Marxism whether openly or not, and guys like C. Vann Woodward were extremely influenced by Marx except it took the form of this internal colonialism." Benson's Social Science Research Council-funded post-doctoral sojourn to Harvard (1951–1952), spent in study with Walter Isard, a

58. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Benson rarely minced words; he loved to "be provocative, not provoking."

specialist in location theory and founder of "regional science," was directly related to his desire to better ground his empirical work on Populists, railroads, and urban-rural competition in theory—especially regional economic theory. Walter Isard's major works came later but already in the early 1950s he had come out with several pioneering essays that captured the attention of a few historians. Isard, ironically, later went to work at Cornell and retired from there. One of the products of Isard's influence on Benson was the latter's proposal to form a committee within the American Historical Association (AHA) devoted to the study of regionalism. Benson circulated a formal memo in December of 1951 to economic historians in the AHA, but his proposal was never accepted.⁵⁹

A push toward regionalism also came from Paul Gates, who strongly encouraged his students to cultivate fields outside of history for theory and methodology). "I had been very much interested in the different locations of economic activity, as part of the mode of production, but I became particularly interested in regionalism during that year I spent at Harvard," Benson recalled. In a letter to James C. Malin, he wrote: "More and more I become convinced of the potential of the regional approach for history."⁶⁰ Regional analyses and location theory provided Benson with an empirical and contextual approach to explaining social conflicts, an approach which promised to give greater empirical strength to Marx's mode of production theory—explained variations in ideology, social structures, cultural development, and class relations on the basis of differences in regional economies. Interestingly enough, Benson's dissertation, "New York Merchants and Farmers in the Communication Revolution, 1873–1887," completed in early 1952, reflected precisely his engagement with a neo-Marxist regional analysis. He carefully differentiated his notion of regionalism from Frederick Jackson Turner's, arguing "that regionalism does offer a very fruitful field for historical exploration and appears to explain American development more adequately than the Turner hypothesis which still dominates American historiography," and emphatically adding: "Turnerian concepts, as they impinge upon this study, are not only unsupported by the data consulted but are directly contradicted by it." Benson also argued that revolutionary economic changes brought about by "technological and organizational innovations in transportation and communication after 1860" had "considerable impact upon American political, social and ideological trends"—especially on Americans' view of the relationship of government to business. His emphasis on the foundational status of economic forces was Marxian (though not exclusively so), but his conclusions anticipated his later overt skepticism about the prospects of revolutionary *or* social-democratic politi-

59. Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001; Lee Benson to James C. Malin, May 7, 1950, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Papers; Lee Benson, "Regionalism and American Economic History," December 9, 1951, folder 18, box 1, Paul Gates Papers.

60. On Gates's encouragement of his students' pursuit of interdisciplinary theory, Allan Bogue had this to say: "One of the pitches that he made to all of the graduate students that worked with him was that they must work outside the History department, that you got ideas from other disciplines and these would help you to see history from a somewhat different perspective." Thus Bogue took minors in economics. Other graduate students, like Benson, took agricultural economics while at Cornell—and as we have seen, continued to pursue economic theory at Harvard. Robert Berkhofer took minors in sociology and anthropology. Mary Young followed suit. Allan G. Bogue interview, July 20, 2001; Lee Benson to James C. Malin, January 30, 1952, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Papers.

cal change. Unlike other scholars—the progressive historians—Benson argued that the impact of economic shifts in the later nineteenth century and the response of reformers to these changes were essentially *conservative* and resulted in greater protection of property rights and private enterprise.⁶¹

Indeed, Benson's personal and emotional frustration with what he felt were simplistic social and political analyses within the Communist party may have been in part transferred to an intellectual attack on Progressive history itself. His essays on Turner and Beard (and his critiques of the Progressive historians of Populism)—constituted a heresy symbolically equal to, and thematically related to, the heresy he voiced within the CP. This time, there was also an element of patricide in his revisionism. Charles Beard was his intellectual idol in high school. Now he was taking him on. Beard's disciples—the orthodox establishment in higher education—were hardly the Stalinists of the CP, but his conflict with them constituted the flip side of the same coin. Lee Benson was revising aspects of a common theoretical issue: the economic interpretation of history. The then grand old men of the American historical profession, Merle Curti, Charles P. Nettels, John D. Hicks—disciples of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard—would hardly be expected to embrace him with open arms.⁶²

Benson's attack on Progressive history corresponded to his overt split with the CP and took various forms—but as he recalled, they were all shaped by an “implicit Marxian standpoint.”⁶³ It was, nonetheless a non-Stalinist, Popular Front version of Marx. His critical essays on Turner, published in 1950 and 1951, and on Beard, published in 1960 as part of a compilation of his historiographical essays, had their roots in seminar and conference papers he wrote in the late 1940s and early 1950s. His critical essay on Beard was first presented in Paul Gates's class back in 1948–1949—*precisely* when he was severing his ties to the CP. So, too, in 1949, soon after his departure from the CP, Benson discovered what he referred to as the “Loria connection.” He was working on a paper on

61. Lee Benson, “New York Merchants and Farmers in the Communication Revolution, 1873–1887” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University Department of History, 1952), i, 1–6.

62. My emphasis here on the emotional, ideological, and reactive element in Benson's scholarship is not meant to suggest that these infected his empiricism. They did not. Benson was a methodical and careful researcher. It *is* meant to suggest that he was drawn to certain questions and certain challenges—as all historians are—by emotional and ideological factors. His sometimes intemperate reactions to what he considered the sloppy scholarship of some of the progressive historians were always anchored in the sources. For example, when he criticized John D. Hicks, historian of Populism, he did so after a scrupulous examination of his use of sources. He wrote to James C. Malin: “My opinion of Hicks's scholarship is unprintable as a result of close checking of his sources. I doubt if a more ‘selective’ and inaccurate use of evidence exists than the *Populist Revolt*.” Lee Benson to James C. Malin, February 23, 1950, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Papers.

63. Lee Benson, “Doing History as Moral Philosophy and Public Advocacy: A Practical Strategy to Lessen the Crisis in American History,” paper presented at the 1981 meeting of the OAH, note 21. The full quote from Benson's essay reads as follows: “For my critique of Beard, and his critics from an *implicit* Marxian standpoint see my *Turner and Beard* (New York, 1960), 95–233. I say ‘implicit Marxian standpoint’ because when that critique was written, I had no tenured job and was afraid that I would never get one if I made my ‘Marxian standpoint’ explicit. During the 1950s, and for some time thereafter, I—for one—was intellectually terrified. In recent years, I have come to see that the self-censorship I practiced as a survival strategy persisted long after I was safely ensconced in a ‘chair’ at the University of Pennsylvania.” My thanks to Peter Novick, whose work (*That Noble Dream*, 331–332) first directed me to Benson's paper and this note. My thanks to Benson for providing me a copy of his delivered AHR paper.

Populism at the time, one growing out of his M.A. thesis. It was to be, as he recalled many years later, a "put-down of western agrarian radicalism." While reading the *Political Science Quarterly* he stumbled across a reference to the work of Italian economist Achille Loria in the October 12, 1892 issue. A paper that had begun as a critique of the work of progressive historians Solon J. Buck and John Hicks on Populism was soon transformed into an extended essay arguing that Turner was not original and had gotten his fundamental ideas about the frontier and free land from Loria, who had—in turn—derived it from Marx. Paul Gates and Curtis Nettels regretted Benson's decision to shift the subject of his essay, believing he was beating a dead horse. Gates felt that Benson's efforts were misdirected, and he encouraged him to get in touch with James C. Malin at the University of Kansas and Fulmer Mood at the University of Wisconsin. Fulmer Mood was a close friend of Merle Curti and both he and Malin had studied with Turner; perhaps Gates believed that Mood and Malin would set the young scholar straight. He was wrong. Malin came to believe that Benson was onto something important, and Fulmer Mood, too, came to accept Benson's thesis. According to Benson, the latter turned into an invaluable source on Turner. Benson recalled getting a telegram from Mood, after the latter had read a draft of his essay; the telegram essentially stated that he was right about the Loria connection. He asked Benson to come out to Wisconsin to visit him. He did, spending several days with Mood in Madison during the course of which, according to Benson, Mood became thoroughly convinced that Turner was an "an imitator and second rate."⁶⁴

Historian Charles P. Nettels was less convinced. Benson recalled Nettels's reaction to his essay: "Nettels sat me down in his office and for two and a half hours denounced me for my denunciation of Turner. He told me that like all Easterners you're not really American. You don't know anything about American History. You have to in fact be born west of the Adirondacks to be a real American historian. He literally bawled me out for two and a half hours, as did Fred Merk, who had been Gates's professor." The essay, which Benson submitted to the Organization of American Historians' Pelzer Prize competition, failed to win; it was just too controversial. A year later, it was published in *Agricultural History*.⁶⁵

In fact, in 1952 Benson was suggesting that his historical writings were jeopardizing his chances for employment at Wisconsin (where he was being consid-

64. Lee Benson to Paul Gates, August 25, 1960, folder 19, box 1, Gates Papers. "My book of essays on Turner and Beard is supposed to be out in a week or two; will send a copy along. No need to comment on it; of course, you have forgotten it, but the Beard essay goes back to a report on Beard that I delivered in 1948–1949 in your seminar;" Benson, *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered* (New York: The Free Press, 1960); Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001; Lee Benson to James C. Malin, March 6, 1950, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas; Lee Benson, "Achille Loria's Influence on American Economic Thought: Including His Contributions to the Frontier Hypothesis," *Agricultural History* 24 (October 1950), 182–199. The essay was reprinted as part 1 of Benson's *Turner and Beard*; As Benson told James C. Malin in early 1950, "Professor Gates, the chairman of my doctoral committee, since I last wrote to you, has read the paper and is not only unimpressed with it, but has indicated a belief that it is entirely tangential to my dissertation. . . ."

65. Lee Benson to James C. Malin, February 23, 1950, folder 5, box 6, James C. Malin Collection; Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001.

ered for a job). He wrote to Paul Gates, in a handwritten postscript to a typed letter:

Among the reasons for doubting that anything will come of Wisconsin Mr. [Howard K.] Beale overheard the tail end of a conversation I had with a friend on Beard last Sun[day] morning at the AHA meeting. I was talking about the possibility of Beard's having been influenced by Loria, stressing particularly Beard's open avowal of economic determinism. Later in the day I bumped into Mr. Curti and he said that he had been informed that I had hopped on the currently fashionable anti-Beard bandwagon. Before I could explain how Mr. Beale had gotten such an impression someone pulled him away.

A few days later Gates replied to Benson that he was concerned that Curti might think "you belong in the anti-Beard camp," and tried to assure him that he would straighten out any possible misinterpretations of his opinions: "Your concern about Wisconsin's view that you have joined the anti-Beardians, I believe I can settle. I just had a note from Curti asking about you and specifically regarding this question. I shall endeavor to say that whatever other disqualifications you have, this is not one." Yet three weeks later Gates was only able to reassure Benson that both Beale and Curti at Wisconsin were "apparently" convinced that he was "not entirely disloyal to CAB [Charles A. Beard]. They will probably look over your thesis as part of their investigation and are in process, I believe, of borrowing it from the library."⁶⁶

By 1961, Gates would hardly have been able to reassure anyone at Wisconsin that Benson was *not* an "anti-Beardian." With the publication of *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* that year, it had become obvious what Benson's central challenge to progressive history was all about. "The present study rejects the economic deterministic interpretation that Frederick J. Turner and Charles A. Beard impressed upon American political historiography," he wrote. By the time he wrote this, in the late 1950s (earlier manuscript copies of *The Concept* had been in circulation for a couple of years before its publication), Benson had completed an intellectual odyssey he had begun while in the CP in the 1940s. "In the United States," he went on to observe in *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, which "is highly heterogeneous, and has high social mobility, I assume that men tend to retain and be more influenced by their ethnic and religious group membership than by their membership in economic classes or groups."⁶⁷ In over 300 pages, Benson disassembled many of the arguments that had formed the core of progressive scholarship about Jacksonian class politics. In their place he marshaled statistical and qualitative data to argue that Whig and Democratic party leaders were drawn from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, that party affiliations and voter behavior were not adequately explained by class, that ideological differences were moderated by a common liberal faith shared by antagonists, and that the most serious causes of strife and conflict in the Jacksonian era (dated by Benson as 1816–1844) were ethnoreligious differences and tensions and not class divisions. *Still*, this was only a *partial* declaration of independence from

66. Lee Benson to Paul W. Gates, January 7, January 22, 1952; Paul W. Gates to Lee Benson, January 11, January 31, 1952, folder 18, box 1, Paul Wallace Gates Papers.

67. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 165; Allan G. Bogue emphasized to me the early circulation of *The Concept*. Allan G. Bogue interview, July 20, 2001.

Beard, Turner, and Marx. It would be wrong to ignore the fact that behind Benson's embrace of social-science history and rejection of Marxist-derived *class* analysis—both demonstrated in *The Concept*—was a belief in the ordered and patterned logic of human behavior, one shaped by evolving modes of production; this was a conviction shared by traditional Marxists and Progressive historians.

It is interesting to recognize—as an important side note—that economic historian and future Nobel Prize laureate Robert Fogel traveled an epistemological and theoretical path similar to Benson's, suggesting that there were definite patterns in the trajectories of postwar ex-Communist scholars. Fogel, as revealed earlier, was active in the CP at Cornell in the mid to late 1940s. He left the party in 1956. Later in life, he recalled—indirectly—his left-wing intellectual roots in a short autobiographical address, one that also revealed that, like Benson, he was very much concerned with the practical implications of scholarship and equally drawn to highly empirical and quantitative social-science methodology.⁶⁸ Like Benson's, Fogel's scholarship reflected some of his experiences in the CP. Though this deserves more detailed elaboration than possible here, Fogel's scholarly focus on the history of slavery and his employment of counterfactual economic hypotheses and cliometric analysis was in part rooted in Marxist soils and in his early activism in organizing African-Americans as a CPUSA operative (his interracial marriage and Harlem organizing activities in the late 1940s and early 1950s suggest his deep roots in the American Left). Fogel, however, unlike Benson, hardly claimed his post-Party scholarship was neo-Marxian; it *was*, however, definitely an embrace of social science—and equally idiosyncratic in its arguments as was Benson's work. It was also equally contentious, a trait best exemplified in the intemperate arguments and tone of his jointly authored cliometric manifesto, *Time on the Cross*.⁶⁹

68. "As the euphoria over the end of World War II abated, the pending problems of the peace became more urgent and pessimism about the ability to sustain full employment was rife. . . . I hoped that studying economics would explain why it was so difficult to maintain full employment during peacetime. . . . I graduated from Cornell in 1948 and worked for a while in my father's meat processing business and then became involved in the presidential campaign of Henry A. Wallace. It was a disappointing experience—Wallace received hardly a million votes—except for one thing: I met and soon married the head of Harlem Youth for Wallace, Enid Cassandra Morgan, my wife, advisor, and friend for more than 47 years. . . . I did not return to scholarly pursuits until the fall of 1956, when I enrolled in the graduate economics program at Columbia University with the intention of obtaining a Ph.D. in economic history. I believed that by combining the study of history and economics I would quickly discover the fundamental forces that had determined technological and institutional changes over the ages and that such knowledge would point to solutions to the postwar problems of instability and inequity. As I became aware of how little was actually known about these large processes and their interconnections, I began to focus on more discrete issues: What did we really know about the impact of the factory system on economic and social institutions? What was the contribution of such new technologies as railroads or steel mills to economic growth? I concluded that, to answer such questions, much greater use had to be made of quantitative evidence, so I set out to master the most advanced analytical and statistical methods that were then taught in the economics department. It was only later that I discovered that the training program I had worked out for myself was unorthodox for an economic historian." Robert William Fogel, "A Life of Learning," American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 34, Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1996. Available on line at: <http://www.acls.org/op34.htm> (accessed May 30, 2003).

69. See Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 61; Robert W. Fogel interview by Ellen Schrecker, June 2, 1978; Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).

Through he left the CP long before Fogel did, Benson, in the 1950s and early 1960s, *did* conceive of his empirical and theoretical explorations as falling within a framework he regarded as neo-Marxist, although he did not use that term at the time. As his writings in the 1970s revealed, he continued to believe in and employ certain elements of Marxism in his scholarship. He recalled in an interview recently that he was interested in the roots of social and economic conflict, less in establishing the existence of ideological consensus: “It was the basis of social group conflict that always interested me and so all of these [projects of mine] were different attempts to account for the nature of conflict and the emphasis was on different forms of conflict including regional conflict.” When he explicitly attempted to reconcile his approach to the study of conflict with Marx’s theory in the 1970s, he specifically praised “Marx’s potentially most comprehensive and credible theory of conflict and cohesion,” his “mode of production theory.” He wrote that Marx’s most important and most fundamental contribution to theory was not a “class-based theory of social revolution in capitalist societies,” but rather a “broadly humanist theory of *the historical evolution and abolition of social and ideological conflict.*”⁷⁰

Benson’s earlier attempts to explicitly reconcile regional variations in agrarian and populist movements with Marxist theory suggested to him that Marx’s mode of production theory—with its emphasis on the shaping influence of changing economic infrastructures on class relations, ideology, law, culture, government, and more—was directly contradictory to Marx’s working-class theory. “The argument is that of course that Marx precisely should have recognized that his mode of production theory meant that in a society based on legal equality of status there wouldn’t be any classes and so the idea of the working class is an absurdity from a genuinely Marxist position.”⁷¹ He contended in two articles published in 1973 and in 1979 that there was a blatant and fundamental contradiction in Marx’s theories. Marx, Benson argued, produced two “ambiguously formulated, radically different theories,” his “mode of production theory” and his “social class conflict theory.”⁷² He condemned, with somewhat intemperate tones, the reductive notions of class that derived from both progressive historians of the early decades of the century and “New Left” or “Economic Determinism, New Frontier Style” historians of the 1960s and 1970s and looked forward to research that would eliminate the “economic determinist strain in Marx and de Tocqueville, combining and extending their fruitful ideas, and incorporating them into a developing body of reference group theory.” Benson clearly viewed his own work not as a *rejection* of Marx and Marxism but as an *extension* and *revision* of Marx, and he hoped to enlarge Marx’s “brilliant social psychological insights” about relative deprivation—attaching it to reference group theory, with its emphasis on the study of individuals’ psychological and

70. Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001.

71. Lee Benson interviews, October 4, 2001 and November 9, 2001; See also Benson’s “Group Cohesion and Social and Ideological Conflict” and his “Marx’s General and Middle-Range Theories of Social Conflict.”

72. Benson, “Group Cohesion and Social and Ideological Conflict,” 744.

ideological attachment to certain "reference" groups irrespective of formal membership and the normative and comparative functions of such groups.⁷³

This is precisely what he was attempting to do in *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*. "I believe that Marx's theories can powerfully help us to understand and explain why the alienation engendered by capitalist relations of production, particularly in highly multicultural societies, contributes to the existence of quasi-communal and communal groups based on ethnocultural and religious attributes," he argued in 1973. "Marx's theories can perform that function especially well when they are further reconceptualized—namely, when they function as the materialist basis of a comprehensive theory of reference group determination of collective and individual behavior."⁷⁴

In the years following his expulsion from the CP, Benson had begun to lay the foundations for these arguments. He had concluded (summarized in his *Turner and Beard: American Historical Writing Reconsidered*) that a crude economic determinist model of social and political behavior was inadequate when applied to advanced capitalist countries such as the U.S. Benson sought a revision of what he called Marx's middle-range theories. His growing acceptance and application of reference group theory and his use of the term "middle-range theory" came out of his immersion in sociological theory in the years 1951–1959 and especially reflected the influence of sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton on his thinking during his sojourn at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research. In fact, one can hardly write the complete history of *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* without noting the fact that it came out of the Bureau and Benson's heavy involvement in its research and theoretical work in the early and mid-1950s, including research growing out of the Elmira 1948 Election Study. As he later admitted, "I was very much influenced by them [voting behavior studies of the Bureau], because, apart from anything else, what the Elmira study did was to show that ethnicity and religion were very significant determinants of voting behavior."⁷⁵

Simultaneous to his growing theoretical quest for correctives to what he considered simplistic Marxist theory, Benson was wrapping up his critique of the early progressive historians. Recalling recently, in an interview, his essay on Charles Beard in the *Turner and Beard* collection, Benson said, "It was written

73. Benson was heavily influenced by Robert Merton. See Robert K. Merton and Alice Kitt, "Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behavior," in *Studies in the Scope and Method of "The American Soldier,"* ed. R. K. Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950).

74. Benson, "Group Cohesion and Social and Ideological Conflict, 756, 764; See also Benson, "The Mistransference Fallacy in Explanations of Human Behavior."

75. Lee Benson interview by Gerald Zahavi, November 2, 2001, audio recording (in author's possession); Lee Benson interview, November 9; Benson's debt to the theoretical work of the Bureau is clearly traceable in his detailed and lengthy correspondence with James C. Malin through the 1950s. See, for example, Lee Benson to James C. Malin, March 2, 1955 and March 14, 1957; for a short review of the history of "reference group" theory—to 1960—see Herbert H. Hyman, "Reflections on Reference Groups," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 24 (Autumn, 1960), 383-396; For early surveys of insights garnered from the Elmira study, see Alice S. Kitt and David B. Gleicher, "Determinants of Voting Behavior," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14 (Autumn, 1950), 393-412; "Proceedings of the American Association for Public Opinion Research at the Fifth Annual Conference on Public Opinion Research, Lake Forest, Illinois, June 15–20, 1950," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 14 (Winter, 1950–1951), 820-868; Lee Benson interview, November 9, 2001.

with Aesopian language, and anybody who reads that knows full well that the different modes of production in the different states was what accounted for the difference in the voting patterns [for the constitution].” According to Benson, Marx—unlike Alexis de Tocqueville—failed to recognize “that once one had legal equality of status classes can’t possibly exist in anything remotely like the pre-capitalist form of class.” Underlying his analysis of farmers and railroad regulation in his dissertation and in *Merchants, Farmers & Railroads* was an argument that “of course it was absurd that anything like class-struggle existed in the U.S.—that different interest groups were the main form of economic conflict, that there were no such things as economic classes or social classes.”⁷⁶ In the 1950s, Benson de-classed Marx.

In a 1992 critical retrospective review of *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, historian Daniel Feller noted that Lee Benson sought to transform the very mode in which historians conduct research, to demonstrate a path toward “scientific history,” one utilizing a “scientific style of analysis, i.e. explicit conceptualization, theory construction, model building, systematic comparison, standard criteria for measurement.” He wanted “not just to explain history,” according to Feller, “but to transcend it.”⁷⁷ Benson’s desire to transcend history was fundamentally rooted in a Marxist emphasis on *praxis*, an emphasis he retained throughout his life. In a 1981 address delivered to the Organization of American Historians, he made it explicit. As he recalled:

Warren Susman invited me to give the keynote paper, which was “History as Advocacy,” as I recall. And the joke is this: the paper was a howling success, meaning that everybody in the audience howled at me, and I’m almost serious because my argument . . . was a very, very major critique of American historians on the ground that it [historical writing] was just scholastic, that we don’t contribute anything to changing the world for the better, and that we had abandoned advocacy for “value free” history, social science and the like.

Members of the audience severely criticized Benson. Yet “the idea that social science should be done in ‘strictly objective value-free terms’” was something he regarded as “absolute nonsense.”

For some, there may be something strange about one of the founders of social-science history condemning “value-free” inquiry. It really was not; it was consistent with his general attitude toward scholarship throughout his life. When he joined scholars in founding the Social Science History Association in 1973, Benson recalled, it was done “to overcome the fragmentation in the social sciences and to argue that the whole point of studying history was to change the world for the better and . . . that that could be done ‘scientifically’ not in the sense of 19th century positivist science.” As the first president of the Association, he helped define its mission—in terms that pushed the organization’s formal mission statement into reformist terrain. His presidential address, delivered in 1977, was titled “Changing Social Science to Change the World: A Discussion Paper,” an appropriate title for a self-defined neo-Marxist committed to an instrumentalist and activist notion of the value of scholarship. In fact, the address began by

76. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001; Lee Benson phone conversation with author, October 29, 2001 (notes).

77. Feller, “Lee Benson,” quoting Benson, 599.

acknowledging the title's paraphrase of Karl Marx's "celebrated rejection of abstract, formalistic philosophy, and his prescription for what 'moral philosophers' ought to do, namely, help change the world into a better world." Though he acknowledged that this was not a profoundly or exclusively Marxist agenda—in fact it had been a prescription of "every major social theorist"—for Benson, Marx's forceful advocacy of a "critical historical social science that would generate credible empirical theories about human behavior highly useful to human beings struggling to create a better world," was fundamental to setting an agenda for social-science historians.⁷⁸ It was the foundation of both his historical work and his community activism in the 1980s and 1990s through the Center for Community Partnerships of the University of Pennsylvania—an attempt to build community-academy partnerships to foster democratic schooling and to "help radically improve West Philadelphia public schools and the neighborhoods in which they are located."⁷⁹

Benson, the doyen of American social-science history, of the "new political history," is not easily pigeonholed.⁸⁰ He himself had come out of the very Marxist traditions he spent much of his professional life criticizing, and came to view his work as one of Marxist *revisionism* not wholesale *rejection*. His commitment to engaged scholarship was long-standing. His seeming repudiation of Marxism was not what some have mistaken it to be—a *simple* repudiation of Marxist theory. He retained much of what *he* believed was "fundamental" in Marx: a belief in the *science* of history and the possibility of overarching explanatory theories for human behavior, a conviction that social-science history was *not* value-free, and an assumption that modes of production *do* strongly shape social, cultural, and psychological human development. As Allan G. Bogue noted in 1986, "Lee Benson has been a sophisticated student of Marx throughout his whole career."⁸¹ Though he may not be the most prominent of the pioneers of modern American political history, through his explorations of the fractured politics of American farmers and Jacksonian democracy, his early engagement with two of the most powerful and influential American historians who had "Americanized" Marx—Charles Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner—Benson helped initiate an intellectual revolution that transformed the way historians conduct their work today. He adapted and applied social-science research methodologies to history, challenged and revised Marxist notions of class and class conflict, and disputed and helped overturn early twentieth-century "progressive" historical paradigms in general.

78. Lee Benson interview, October 4, 2001. Benson served as the first president of the Association, from 1976 to 1977. See his presidential address, "Changing Social Science to Change the World: A Discussion Paper," available online at the Social Science History Association Web site: http://www.ssha.org/mainsite/presidential_addresses/benson.pdf (accessed May 30, 2003).

79. See Lee Benson and Ira Harkavy, "Community-School-Higher Education Partnerships as a Strategy for Advancing Liberal Learning, Democratic Schooling, and Democracy" (Opening plenary paper presented to the 2001 National Conference of the Association for General and Liberal Studies on *The Changing Face of Liberal Education for a Democratic Society*). Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, October 11, 2001 (copy in author's possession).

80. Formisano, "The Invention of the Ethnocultural Interpretation," 453-477; Wilentz, "On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America," 48.

81. Allan G. Bogue, "Systematic Revisionism in American History," 142.

Benson's involvement with the Communist party in the 1940s and his disturbing encounter with internal Communist party racial and ideological tensions in the late 1940s were important shaping experiences in his life. More importantly, however, the trial of Lee Benson was imbedded in a biographical and political narrative of Cold War America and closely linked to a central narrative of American intellectual history in the post-World War II era. The events and intellectual odyssey outlined above had an intimate relationship to the transformation of historical discourse in the United States, specifically to an emerging revision of the field of political history. I have tried to suggest that there were several dimensions to this story: biographical, local, political, social, and historiographical. Tracking the emerging scholarship of Lee Benson has necessarily taken me into local and regional terrain, into personal narratives, into political and social history, and into textual exegesis. My attempts to closely link the emergence of a new paradigm in the study of United States political history to a local and regional narrative—one intimately focused on Cornell University and Ithaca, New York—was also meant to suggest the radical roots of the so-called “consensus school” of history that emerged in the early decades of the Cold War, roots deeply nourished by a growing alienation and disenchantment of Marxist scholars with orthodox Marxism.

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