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# The Comic Grotesque: Troubling the Body Politic in American Graphic Satire from World War I to the Great Depression

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The Comic Grotesque:  
Troubling the Body Politic in American Graphic Satire  
from World War I to the Great Depression

by

Bryna Rae Campbell

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction Figures</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Chapter One</b> Perfect Soldiers and Modern Citizens: <i>The Masses</i> and the Comic Grotesque	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter One Figures</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Chapter Two</b> James Thurber, Middle-Class Manhood, and the “Startling Present”	<b>71</b>
<b>Chapter Two Figures</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Chapter Three</b> Deformed, Chained, and Maimed: Jacob Burck, Gardner Rea, and the Leftist Critique of New Deal Capitalism	<b>119</b>
<b>Chapter Three Figures</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>Chapter Four</b> Defiling a Divinity: Gropper and Anti-Japanese Satire	<b>187</b>
<b>Chapter Four Figures</b>	<b>232</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>258</b>

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## INTRODUCTION

During the Great Depression, many of the concerns in the United States about economic collapse, political corruption, social injustice, and the future of the nation were expressed through the identifiable language of the human body. We need to look no further than Franklin D. Roosevelt's first presidential campaign in the early 1930s—when the economic outlook was at its bleakest—to discover how critical the role of bodily discourse was in distilling meaningful political narratives from the cacophony of events that marked the dramatic shift from a nation of economic success to one faced with the challenges of massive unemployment. For Roosevelt, the “forgotten man” became a particularly powerful focal point for channeling national outrage over the Hoover administration's failures to fix the economy and a justification for the New Deal policies that he would enact once elected.<sup>1</sup> What Roosevelt and many others in the period would come to believe was that the symbolic language of the body imbued problems—and related solutions—with a sense of cogency and directness not possible through factual details or statistics. Over and over in the 1930s, we find evidence of political leaders and activists—pro-government advocates and anti-government dissenters alike—invoking different figure types as models for their ideological vision.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt appropriated the term “Forgotten Man” from nineteenth-century libertarian academic William Graham Sumner, who had used it to refer to the middle class. Roosevelt first repurposed the phrase in a radio address in April 1932 during his first radio campaign. On the symbolic language of the motif, American studies scholar Susan Currell has located the “forgotten man” within a bodily discourse of degeneracy and illness—as a symbol of national weakness curable by new political leadership. See Susan Currell, “Eugenic Decline and Recovery in Self-Improvement Literature of the 1930s,” in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. Christina Codgell and Susan Currell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 44-47.

<sup>2</sup> While there were a number of different motifs within Great Depression era imagery, I am thinking in particular of the prominence of hardy young men, which appeared in both publicly funded art and New Deal propaganda and in politically radical art as a symbol of proletarian defiance. Analysis of the

But if some treated the body as a vessel for articulating political ideology, others saw it as a productive site through which to trouble those body politics. My dissertation brings attention to the thriving field of graphic satire, specifically, where many artists in the 1930s exploited disruptive images of the body to challenge the often totalizing construction of society embedded within many of the debates in the period around recovery and progress. The vision of America that Roosevelt created once in office is only one example, but nonetheless an influential one: through New Deal rhetoric, publicly funded art works, and regular radio addresses, the president's administration held up the traditional family as a reassuring—if antiquated—emblem of nationhood; and used the youthful male worker as a highly gendered symbol of strength, work, and duty to nation.<sup>3</sup> The artists I examine confronted the confining imagery promulgated in this and other sociopolitical contexts with deformations and jarring references that engaged more dynamic, somatic, and unstable understandings of society and the self. I focus on the strategies that artists used to trouble ideologies, which I identify and analyze as a form of satirical expression known in the history of art as the comic grotesque.

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ideological implications of this motif within federally funded imagery can be found in a number of studies, including Erika Doss, "Toward an Iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art, 1930-1945," *Design Issues* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 53-66; Erika Doss, "Looking at Labor," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 24 (2002), 230-57; Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); and Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). Melosh, who is particularly interested in how gender ideology is conveyed through this motif, also examines other gendered typologies in public art, including the female helpmate and the farm family. A useful introduction to the hard male body in leftist work can be found in Helen Langa, "Imag(in)ing Labor: Fine Prints and Their Historical Contexts," in *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 128-66. Recent examinations of this body type have taken into account the homoerotic subtexts of the muscular body. For a queer reading, see Jonathan Weinberg, "I Want Muscle: Male Desire and the Image of the Worker in American Art of the 1930s," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 115-34.

<sup>3</sup> Both of these motifs are covered in Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, and Melosh, *Engendering Culture*.

A work by the Communist artist Jacob Burck that mocks Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corp work program (hereafter CCC) is a useful entry point into our discussion of this critical language of satirical engagement (fig. 1). The depiction of three amputees at work is a scathing reinterpretation of the propaganda posters for the program that feature hardy young men holding their tools of labor (fig. 2). In many ways, the CCC was the perfect emblem for Roosevelt's ideals of political citizenship. Designed to put the nation's unemployed single men to work on forestry and conservation projects, the program imbued the "forgotten man" with a sense of greater purpose in the form of national duty. As a Communist, Burck was suspicious of the very notion of this program. He approached the concept of national recovery from a blasphemous position, presenting his viewers with fragmented bodies that immediately evoked a very different notion of political citizenship in the suffering of veterans drafted to fight during World War I.<sup>4</sup>

Burck's brutally searing, nose-thumbing take on the Roosevelt's efforts towards economic recovery and the ideals they embodied was hardly anomalous. Throughout the thirties, artists across the political spectrum were using disruptive bodily forms—deformations of limbs, references to pain, vulgar associations, or crude techniques—to mock the attempts being used to smooth over political turbulence, attempts at revolt, and communal anxieties about social tensions and the direction of the nation. Emerging in the context of record unemployment rates, the explosion of political radicalism, dramatic shifts of gender and class power dynamics, and emerging threats of fascism, these iconoclastic, rebellious, or evocative bodies gained popular attention within a thriving publishing industry that maintained much of its readership during the Depression through its satire. *The New Yorker* (1925-present), one of the top three magazines in

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter Three discusses the historical and political circumstances of this work and the critical issues it raises in much more detail.

terms of sold advertising pages, was able to turn a profit almost every year of the Depression through a steady stream of witty satires about the changing social dynamics of urban Manhattan.<sup>5</sup> Political attacks against the government like the one by Burck reached viewers hungry for change through the Communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* (1924-56) and the literary and artistic hub for proletarian radicalism, *New Masses* (1926-48).<sup>6</sup> In 1938, art historian William Murrell remarked on the profound popularity of “shrewd and caustic” satire within the “present mood of depression-born seriousness,” wondering, “Might there not be, these many speculators seem to ask, some interpretation, some constructive criticism, some helpful historical analogies, as well as destructive ridicule and hearty laughter?”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as I argue in this dissertation, satire engaging the comic grotesque provided the public with a powerful and concise language of critique that gave memorable form to their anger and frustrations.

This dissertation focuses on a small group of artists, linked more by their rebellious spirit than by a single political ideology, to analyze this largely overlooked form of political engagement from WWI through the 1930s. In their works we can locate a productive cross-section of the most urgent themes related to subjectivity and embodiment occupying political discourses of the period. These figures include Burck and Gardner Rea, both anti-capitalist leftists whose distortion of labor confronted the ideology of the New Deal; *The New Yorker* artist and political liberal James Thurber, whose unsettling narratives of overbearing women and furtive men act as the physical embodiment of the pressures of middle-class responsibility in the

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the financial successes of *The New Yorker* during the Depression, see Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 96-112.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of leftist publications, see Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, “Art on the Left in the United States, 1918-37,” in *Art and Art Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997); and Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Party, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), especially 103-22 and 207-24.

<sup>7</sup> William Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor, Vol II: 1865-1938* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1938), 260.

interwar period; and leftist artist William Gropper, who produced some of the earliest and most controversial anti-fascist satire of the period about Japan. All of the figures were well-known entities in the period even if most are not familiar to us today.<sup>8</sup> Beginning with the works themselves and their published context as my points of departure, I argue that the comic grotesque was a vital form of sociopolitical activation in the thirties. For the artists in this dissertation, the comic grotesque not only operated as metaphorical tool. With its emphasis on destabilization and agitation, it was also as a means of challenging viewers' ideological foundations, breaking down presumed boundaries between the body and the larger world.

## THE COMIC GROTESQUE

Most dictionaries define the “grotesque” as an adjective used to describe that which is “comically or repulsively ugly.”<sup>9</sup> While this is a useful starting point for theorizing the comic grotesque in this dissertation, immediately this basic definition leaves us with questions. How do we decide what is or is not “repulsively ugly?” By who’s terms? What conditions make the ugly verge on the “comic” or the “repulsive?” And how can this aesthetic formation be applied to graphic satire, which is a visual form of comic expression created with the explicit purpose of illuminating folly or conveying a moral message?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is evidenced most directly by their prominence in the original publications. Gardner Rea, who is probably the least known of the artists in this study, published in both *New Yorker* and *New Masses*. While this dissertation focuses on his role in *New Masses*—as humor scholar Judith Yaross Lee notes, his work for *New Yorker* also deserves far more attention. Judith Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 14.

<sup>9</sup> This is the “google” dictionary definition. The basic definition in Webster’s online dictionary is similar: “very strange or ugly in a way that is not normal or natural.” See [webster.com](http://webster.com) (accessed 15 November 2014).

<sup>10</sup> “Visual satire” overlaps with “caricature” but the two terms are not completely interchangeable. Caricature is a term that was first coined by Annibale Carracci in the early 1500s. It literally means to “load” or “to exaggerate,” and involves the exaggeration, reduction, or distortion of physical features

Right away, it should become clear that when we are dealing with the grotesque we are working with an approach that is meant to inspire an intense visceral reaction. Artists who choose to use the grotesque in graphic satire deploy a contentious perspective designed to work through the body to invoke an entirely new comprehension of society and culture. Yet for all of the complex reactions that the grotesque might invoke in a viewer, on a basic level the concept is also profoundly reductive. As literary scholar James Goodwin emphasizes, the grotesque figure and its meanings are detected and understood “in terms of pronounced, and often absolute contrasts.”<sup>11</sup> The grotesque contains just enough that is recognizable to draw one into the image, while also dramatically recasting the recognizable in relation to the strange, bizarre, or discomfiting.<sup>12</sup>

While the chief focus of my dissertation involves the twentieth-century understandings of the grotesque in relation to modern American ideologies of the body politic, it is important to recognize the comic grotesque as a historical concept that links the figures in this project to a

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while still retaining enough reference points to the individual, animal, or object to still be recognizable as such by the viewer. As numerous scholars of caricature have noted, the humor in caricature is formed by what E.H. Gombrich and Ernst Kriss have called “equivalency”—the relationship between the expected representation and the extent of exaggerations or distortions. Visual satire uses a variety of techniques—including but not limited to caricature—to expose folly or convey a moral message, and can be found in visual culture dating all the way back to ancient Egypt. Notably, caricature is often, but not *necessarily*, satirical. For more on caricature, see E.H. Gombrich and Ernst Kriss, *Caricature* (Harmondsworth: King Penguin Books, 1940) and Patricia Mainardi, “Why Caricature is Funny,” *Persistence of Vision* 14 (1997), 9-24. For an overview of the relationship between caricature and satire, see Constance C. McPhee and Nadine M. Orenstein, *Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), 4-6; and Elizabeth Childs, *Daumier and Exoticism: Satirizing the French and the Foreign* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> James Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>12</sup> I find art historian Francis Connelly’s use of the term “boundary creature” an especially evocative image of the grotesque in relation to the concept of a borderland. Connelly draws our attention to what the grotesque *does* as a means of illuminating what it *is*—“transgressing, merging, overflowing, destabilizing” conventions and expectations. Francis Connelly, “Introduction,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4. See also Francis Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

broader satirical tradition. The grotesque is a term that has been part of visual culture since the late fifteenth century, though its original meaning was lighter. In Italy in the late 1400s, the grotesque was used to refer to whimsical ornamentation—forms that merged animals, plants, masks and mythical beings—found in the borders of recently unearthed Roman frescoes that extended the known range of classical motifs. These forms subsequently became the inspiration for fanciful imagery made by Raphael and many of the Mannerists. The zoomorphic motifs and fantastical drolleries were later echoed in cartoons in Northern Europe of the 1600s. In the north, the associative link between ugliness and evil in religious art helped to secure the grotesque as a language of satirical critique.<sup>13</sup> By the 1800s, a publishing enterprise had become established in England and France that fostered the taste for the kind of provocative formations that we find in some of the works in this dissertation.

Grotesque satire typified by James Gilray’s “Monstrous Craws, at a New Coalition Feast” (1787) first appeared in London, where the rapid expansion of the English press had been fostered by a constitutional monarchy, an active two party system, and a broad public interest in government affairs (fig. 3).<sup>14</sup> In his scathing caricature of the British monarchy’s excessive demands on the public purse, Gilray portrays the notoriously miserly King George III, Queen Charlotte, and George, the Prince of Wales, with distended goiters that resembled coin bags shoving coins into their mouths.<sup>15</sup> In France, we find some of the most scandalous uses of the comic grotesque during the King Louis Philippe’s reign—a period between 1830 and 1835 when

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<sup>13</sup> For more discussion on these early *grotteschi* and subsequent uses in early modern satire, see McPhee and Orenstein, *Infinite Jest*, 8; and Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque*, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Typically those works circulated through print shops that displayed the works in front shop windows, much to contempt of those being mocked. For an overview of this history, see McPhee and Orenstein, *Infinite Jest*, 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Gilray’s conception had been informed by the recent public display in the city of three “wild-born” individuals with distended goiters. For more discussion of the political subtext of this work, see McPhee and Orenstein, *Infinite Jest*, 102-3.

censorship laws were porous enough for artists and editors to challenge the monarchy with lithographs like Honoré Daumier's "Gargantua" (1831). "Gargantua" caricatures the King as a grotesque character from François Rabelais's stories, consuming taxes (and his own assistants) while defecating decrees (fig. 4).<sup>16</sup>

In the U.S., the comic grotesque first found vivid form in the works of satirist Thomas Nast, whose campaign against the corrupt New York commissioner William "Boss" Tweed in *Harper's Weekly* in the 1870s helped to land the politician in jail. His caricature of Tweed as Caius Marius, the exiled consul of Rome, is one of many such works to exaggerate the commissioner's plump physique using his bloated body as an apt metaphor for his own corrupt lust for power (fig. 5). In the years that artists in this dissertation came of age, the American bohemian leftist journal *The Masses* operated as the chief engine for the comic grotesque in the form of scathing satires of industrial capitalism, attacks on civil liberties by reactionaries, and America's participation in World War I. *The Masses* is discussed in detail in Chapter One as an important historical precedent to the comic grotesque as a strategy in the thirties.

This dissertation draws from this history as well a range of critical theories about the grotesque as appropriate to the particularities of the artists and cultural contexts. In the broadest sense, I treat the comic grotesque as an "attitude towards history," to borrow a concept by Depression-era

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<sup>16</sup> Art historian Elizabeth Childs highlights how these scathing images—which were distributed through print shops or in some of the first serial publications *Le Caricature* and *Le Charivari* (both founded by the anti-monarchy artist and entrepreneur Charles Philippon) pushed the language of caricature in new directions. They thwarted, challenged, and questioned the contradictory promises of artistic freedom and containment made by the "Citizen King," who had come to power with the promise of liberal constitutional monarchy. Their work subsequently influenced later artists interested in challenging their own respective governments. See Elizabeth C. Childs, "The Body Impolitic: Censorship and Daumier," in *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts* (University of Washington Press, 1997). For more on the publications where anti-monarchy political satire was published, see James Cuno, "Charles Philippon, La Maison Aubert, and the Business of Caricature in Paris, 1829-1841," *Art Journal* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1983), 347-54.



leftist literary and social critic Kenneth Burke. In his 1937 book by this name, Burke describes “attitudes towards history” as constituting the underlying filters that shape the world and provide an explanation for motivational structures. For Burke, the grotesque was a willfully oblique “attitude” towards prevailing social formations of history—a “reversal of the customary meanings of dark and light” that agitates, reorients, and discloses the “ideological architecture” underlying these formations.<sup>17</sup> Burke’s theoretical model provides a pathway for us to see the set of pictorial strategies in this dissertation as the material output of an iconoclastic philosophy towards society. The grotesque was an attitude that was animated by a stance against ideologies that foreground perfectibility.<sup>18</sup>

In my case studies, I have also turned to Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussions of the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World*, published in Russian in 1936 (translated into English in 1968), and particularly his notion of the “bodily lower stratum” as a leveling device that insists on the materiality of the body as a means of social disruption.<sup>19</sup> In Bakhtin’s image of the grotesque—which derives from popular folk culture of the middle ages—evocations of the earth, darkness, mystery, procreation, decay, scatology, lactation, and impropriety merge

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937, reprint 1984), 58-59. A useful analysis of Burke’s concept can be found in Goodwin, *Modern American Grotesque*, 2-5.

<sup>18</sup> For Burke, we should note, the notion of the grotesque was a deadly serious matter—a perception of discordance without smiling—and never mixed with ironic, ridiculous, or absurd expressions that might engender laughter in those who shared the sociopolitical position expressed in a work of graphic satire in some of the images. Burke tended to sever what I would argue is an overlapping territory between humor and discomfort found in grotesque satire.

<sup>19</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 21-25. Bakhtin locates the grotesque within medieval folk culture, using François Rabelais’s writings as his point of focus; he also links grotesque festivals to carnival festivals, where social order is temporarily suspended. Since his work was translated into English in 1968, a number of scholars have explored its broader symbolic applications in culture, literature, and politics. I am thinking, in particular, of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For a useful overview of Bakhtin’s theories of the grotesque, see Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

productively into a monumental image of dynamism and flux: the “body in the act of becoming...never finished, never completed.”<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin’s construction of the grotesque is both more bodily and more comic than Burke’s formulation. The grotesque breaks down the boundaries between the body and the broader world in Bakhtin’s theorization, conjuring a powerful—if romanticized—reordering of society that offers an especially productive framework for analyzing works from the period that were designed to denigrate those in power by means of corporeal insults.

In addition to these approaches, I have also incorporated critical analyses of Bakhtin’s theoretical framework that reveal those elements in his work that romanticize the grotesque. These include feminist and disabilities scholarship (discussed in more detail below) that foregrounds the contradictory nature of the grotesque. Much of the grotesque satire of the period, as we shall see, gained its cultural power within a set of historical discourses on social, physical, and psychological normalcy—constructed and disseminated in a wide variety of ways including, but not limited to, intelligence testing, self-help books, vernacular psychology, eugenics, popular films, and advertising. Feminist scholar Mary Russo’s discussion of the fear and loathing of the female body in the grotesque offers a particularly useful model for asking larger questions about the gendered dimensions of the concept, in particular.<sup>21</sup> Often, artists employing the grotesque continued to construct and promulgate hierarchies of social order even as they challenged political ideologies.

## **STATE OF THE FIELD**

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<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 63.

Each chapter engages with the historical scholarship for the specific artists examined in the dissertation. The purpose of this section is to review the approaches to American graphic satire in the thirties within broader histories of the period. The majority of the scholarship on American graphic satire from the thirties consists of brief mentions in histories of graphic satire and caricature, or in surveys of American art of the Great Depression. In many of the more general graphic satire surveys, work from this period is treated as little more than a coda to the more formative years of political satire that had developed in England and France, respectively, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup>

While almost all general studies on American art of the thirties from the past three decades acknowledge the prominence of graphic satire as a “weapon,” there is very little scholarship that explores the aesthetics of bodily distortion and the grotesque found in many works in relation to broader cultural discourse of embodiment underlying the period’s ideological debates.<sup>23</sup> Although well-known images by Burck and Gropper appear within broader studies of the period, they tend to be treated superficially, either as works that merely reflect a

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<sup>22</sup> See for example, McPhee and Orenstein, *Infinite Jest*; and Bevis Hillier, *Cartoons and Caricatures* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1970). American satire is completely ignored in the exhibition catalogue, *Caricature and Its Role in Graphic Satire* (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1971). It is worth noting within this context how comparatively slim the scholarship is on graphic satire compared to other fields of art history and visual culture. Much of the basic history work in graphic satire was done in the 1970s or has been confined to exhibitions, such as the 2011 exhibition “Infinite Jest,” held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That said, a growing interest in the role of the comic arts is emerging. This shift is demonstrated in the field of American art, specifically, by a special issue devoted to the comic arts in the journal *American Art* in Spring 2008, and Jennifer Greenhill, *Playing it Straight: Art and Humor in the Gilded Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Greenhill’s book offers an in-depth analysis of strategies of visual humor allowed in the fine arts in the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>23</sup> The fascination with leftist art in U.S. during the Great Depression—and its attendant role as a “weapon” in the fight against social and political injustices—emerged in the 1970s as scholars turned primarily to social and iconographic approaches to retrieve a vital radical American art heritage that had been virtually forgotten during the height of the Cold War. Early examples of this scholarship include David Shapiro, *Social Realism: Art as a Weapon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1973); and Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Painting of the 1930s* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1983).

passion for social engagement that is thought to characterize the so-called “Red Decade,” or as self-evident displays of the artists’ own specific sociopolitical interests.<sup>24</sup> Scholarship on Thurber and Rea (who began his career at *The New Yorker*) is mostly confined to studies about the development of *The New Yorker* as one of the most commercially successful magazines of the period.<sup>25</sup> Generally speaking, this particular body of work focuses not on the relationships between aesthetics and cultural expression, but instead on the management and commercial success of the magazine, which catered primarily to young middle-class Manhattanites. Similarly, the only major study providing an overview of the politically radical publications that flourished in the period—Virginia Marquardt’s 1997 book *Art and Art Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940*—is limited to discussions of each publication’s general themes.<sup>26</sup>

Still, a growing interest in the relationship between ideology and the aesthetics of provocation within graphic satire is evident in much of the recent scholarship, particularly within the sub-field of politically radical art from the interwar period. Andrew Hemingway’s massive 2002 study *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Party, 1926-1956* is primarily concerned with the institutional initiatives that allowed Communist-themed art to flourish in the thirties. But notably, it also includes a section on *New Masses* that demonstrates how political satirist Adolph Dehn and *New Masses* editor Michael Gold, among others, incorporated the grotesque as part of their “proletarian aesthetics” to create evocative biological

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Burck and Gropper are mentioned in the exhibition catalogue, *The Image of America in Caricature and Cartoon* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1975), but their most incendiary work is left out of the discussion.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Yagoda, *About Town*, and Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*. Thurber—who is better known for his literary satire than his drawings—has also been the subject of several biographies. Chapter Two discusses their approach to his work much more fully.

<sup>26</sup> Marquardt, *Art and Art Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940*. Unfortunately, her study is also marred by factual inaccuracies, as I discovered from my own independent examination of the *New Masses*.

metaphors for the decadence of American capitalism.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Helen Langa's 2004 book *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s* highlights the prominence of violent depictions of the body as metaphors for fascism in graphic satire.<sup>28</sup> Because she is interested in bringing attention to the range of artists engaged with the issue by means of numerous examples, however, her approach does not rest on an in depth analysis of individual images.<sup>29</sup>

While not about graphic satire per se, Bram Dijkstra's 2003 book *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1920-1950* is significant for raising broader questions about the methodological frameworks that have dominated the discourse on this period before the 2000s.<sup>30</sup> As Dijkstra notes, most United States scholarship on the art of the 1930s has largely sidestepped important aesthetic differences within the category of "social realism," a vast body of representational works termed as such because they share a similar political attitude and iconography. Dijkstra argues convincingly for an aesthetic of expressionism as a major strain within socio-political themed art of the period.<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Spies's 2004 *American Art* essay

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<sup>27</sup> Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 11-15.

<sup>28</sup> Langa focuses specifically on works on the Spanish Civil War, which became a focal point for the anti-fascism Popular Front movement in the second half of the thirties. Langa, *Radical Art*, 167-203. Langa's work is a productive expansion on art historian Cécile Whiting's study on fascist art, which includes a section on early anti-fascist propaganda in serial publications. Her work focuses mainly on how Communist iconography is used to form an anti-fascist argument. See Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism and American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Notably, Langa has also made key contributions to our understanding of anti-lynching prints that fall within this general body of provocative imagery. As with her book on radical printmaking, she tends to favor an approach that focuses more on breadth than on depth of analysis of individual works. See Helen Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 11-39.

<sup>30</sup> See Bram Dijkstra, *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change, 1920-1950* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> The use of "social realism" to describe all prints and paintings in the 1930s with some kind of leftist content first came into prominence in the 1970s. See Shapiro, *Social Realism*. For another historiographic discussion of its use and the problems with the term, see Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, "Introduction," in *The Social and the Real* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), xv-xviii. To a certain degree, Dijkstra's work is an expansion on art historian John Baur's early overview of this period, where he brings attention to the "caricatural tendencies" and

“‘Girls and Gags’: Sexual Display and Humor in Reginald Marsh’s Burlesque Images” is one of two recent art historical studies to use the theories of the grotesque, specifically, to examine art of the thirties, albeit not within the context of graphic satire. Using Bakhtin’s theories of the comic grotesque, Spies exposes the “ambivalent reaction to the exposed lower class female body, a response that alternated between desire, humor, and disgust” found in many of American scene painter Reginald Marsh’s images of women.<sup>32</sup> Much more recently, Anthony J. Morris’s 2012 *American Art* essay “Paul Cadmus and Carnival, 1934” uses Bakhtin’s theories of the comic grotesque to offer a reading of American scene artist Paul Cadmus’s controversial paintings of carousing navy officers and raucous Coney Island crowds as a celebration of unofficial culture that challenged societal norms.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, while not about the thirties, David Holloway’s 2005 essay “Visualizing Dissent in World War I: Modernism, and the End of ‘Liberal’ Progressivism” from the anthology *American Visual Culture* represents a significant contribution to our understanding of aesthetics of provocation in the context of satirical publication *The Masses* (1911-17).<sup>34</sup> Holloway locates the embodied expressions of resistance in anti-World War I satire within a cultural discourse of duty, citizenship, and efficiency. Both the works he discusses and his methodology are analyzed in detail in Chapter One as a productive framework for examining the aesthetic alignments of specific political ideologies in the early twentieth century.

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distortions in much of the politically radical art in the period, including William Gropper’s paintings and drawings. Baur also writes that Gropper’s “graphic work” has shown a “constant satirical incisiveness.” John Baur, *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 41-42.

<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Spies, “‘Girls and Gags’: Sexual Display and Humor in Reginald Marsh’s Burlesque Images,” *American Art* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 55.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony J. Morris, “Paul Cadmus and Carnival, 1934,” *American Art* 26, No. 3 (Fall 2012), 86-99.

<sup>34</sup> David Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent in World War I: Modernism, and the End of ‘Liberal’ Progressivism, in Art from *The Masses*,” in *American Visual Cultures*, ed. David Holloway and John Beck (London: Continuum, 2005), 63-80.

## METHODOLOGY

In this dissertation, I contribute to the growing interest in the aesthetics of resistance within American graphic satire of the Great Depression, using the comic grotesque as a framework to broaden our understanding beyond sociopolitical motivations. My project includes a cultural analysis of the works as images that actively engage with debates around identity, power, community, and governance as they are channeled through historical understandings of body. Throughout this introduction, I argue that the comic grotesque was a strategy that artists used to motivate their viewers towards social or political action. Many of the works were designed to confront the viewer in a viscerally disruptive way, with the goal of incurring communal outrage towards the system. Accordingly, considering the cultural significance of the comic grotesque requires a particularly close examination of the artists' motivations, the reception of the works (when it is available), the intellectual and visual discourses that gave the works their authority within their printed contexts, and other associated visual texts that played a role in shaping the reception of these images.

To develop my research methodology, I turned to a body of scholarship on the grotesque and comic distortion from outside American art history scholarship of the Great Depression. Notably, cultural approaches to graphic satire have played a far more prominent role within the comparatively robust field of scholarship on European graphic satire. Judith Weschler's 1982 book *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, for example—which links the popularity of caricature in nineteenth-century France to psychological, medical, and anthropological theories on physiognomy—remains a vital contribution to our

understanding of the intellectual discourses shaping the history of graphic satire.<sup>35</sup> More recently, Elizabeth Childs's 2004 book *Daumier and Exoticism: Satirizing the French and the Foreign* has added new complexities to this historical context by closely analyzing French caricature engaged with the intercultural practices of exoticism.<sup>36</sup> In the field of English graphic satire, meanwhile, the 2001 anthology *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, edited by Bernadette Fort and Angela Rosenthal, demonstrates how "systems of difference" within satire exposed the body as a key site for debating cultural understandings of gender, sexuality, and race.<sup>37</sup>

Like the authors published in *The Other Hogarth*, I am particularly interested in what Fort and Rosenthal have described as "different aspects of corporeal signification" occurring within graphic satire through overlapping contextual frames of communication.<sup>38</sup> Within my project, the most immediate venue to explore these issues has been the context of the publication itself. The satires in this study were published primarily in the New York based magazines *New Masses*, *Daily Worker*, *The New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*, although some reappeared in exhibitions and books. Their cultural significance was encoded within the context of these journals and was shaped by the images and text around them, but they also resonated within a set of other cultural contexts. I began my research with a close examination of these publications,

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Weschler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>36</sup> See Elizabeth C. Childs, *Daumier and Exoticism: Satirizing the French and the Foreign* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). Childs's approach to exoticism and caricature is also evident in Childs, "The Body Impolitic: Censorship and Daumier," in *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts*.

<sup>37</sup> Bernadette Fort and Angela Rosenthal, "Introduction," in *The Other Hogarth: Aesthetics of Difference*, ed. Bernadette Fort and Angela Rosenthal (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Fort and Rosenthal, "Introduction," in *The Other Hogarth*, 5.



looking not just at the issues immediately relevant to my chosen artists and themes, but also scanning several years of publications on microfilm or in facsimile.<sup>39</sup>

This broader sweep of the periodicals was revealing in two ways. First, a general scan of the content—the cartoons, to be sure, but also the editorials and advertisements—allowed me to better understand the tone and presumed audience in a far more nuanced way than was possible through reading secondary sources on the material. Second, because I began my project with a keen recognition that the meaning and quality of humor can also change over time—making some forms of comic expression especially difficult to decipher today—it was important for me to reconstruct the sequential framework in which the satire was created as best I could so that I could interpret the work within a historically conscious way. I have found that very few studies on American graphic satire have taken the time to look at the historical particularities involved in some of the best known works, almost always treating them somewhat reductively as straightforward expressions of a given artist’s political position.<sup>40</sup> As became especially evident in my examination of Burck’s and Rea’s satires criticizing the New Deal, much of the agitating language in political satire in the thirties can only be fully understood when placed into the dialogical framework in which they appeared in relation to other images.

Still, these publications alone only provided a piece of a larger historical picture. Often the details did not fully emerge until I looked across multiple platforms within the mass media.

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<sup>39</sup> Though almost all of these publications have been preserved by microfilm, none of them have been digitized. Despite the obvious challenges, examining them within this context does have its advantages. Scrolling through the issues in order allowed me to have some sense of the general structure of these works, the scale of the images in comparison to the whole, and the shifts in tone and content over time.

<sup>40</sup> This is the case, for example, in Langa, *Radical Art*, and Whiting, *Antifascism and American Art*. Chapter Four operates as a particularly useful case study exposing the limitations of this approach. In most studies, Gropper’s controversial work “Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize” is isolated from the context of the publication in which it appeared. As I explore in more detail within that chapter, *Vanity Fair* originally commissioned as part of a larger commentary related to culture of celebrity and its impact on public figures.

In addition to the publications noted above, I also consulted other publications, particularly the *New York Times* through its online database, to flesh out the synchronic details and construct different sides of a particular issue. This part of my research also involved an examination of artists' papers, the broader histories of the specific sociopolitical perspectives of those involved in the creation and publication of the works, and explorations of the historical issues at stake in the individual works.<sup>41</sup>

While these contexts were useful for gathering information about the immediate issues and a range of political perspectives on these topics, to have a broader understanding of the comic grotesque I needed to expand my search to explore the aesthetic forms and motifs themselves. For this part of the project, I was able to take advantage of an explosion of research in American studies, cultural history, and disability studies in recent years committed to a question critical to my own project: how, materially and institutionally speaking, was the “normal” body (or “average” body) constructed and maintained within American society in the first half of the twentieth century?

Disabilities scholar Lennard J. Davis's thoughts on normalcy have been especially useful for my own critical awareness of the modern notion of “normal” as an ideology that emerged with industrialization and a set of social practices linked to nationality, race, gender, criminality,

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<sup>41</sup> This body of texts includes Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture* (London: Verso, 1997). Both of these studies are exhaustive in their attention to the primary sources, providing a clear and detailed narrative of a leftist culture in the thirties. Some of my chief secondary sources for fleshing out the sociopolitical views of those involved in *The New Yorker* have included: Judith Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, which is the most detailed look at the founding of the magazine published thus far; and Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. Wendy Wick Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature in America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), which was published for the exhibition of the same name, provided a useful starting point for an examination of *Vanity Fair's* approach to modern society.

and the like.<sup>42</sup> As Davis himself notes, the theories of the grotesque and disability studies operate within overlapping discourses of normalcy. Davis has also reminded me of the difficulty of approaching such a fundamental concept as “normal” since each of us endeavors, often unconsciously, to “be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state.”<sup>43</sup> In as much as I could, I tried to approach the grotesque from a point of empathy for the social “other,” considering how works employing the grotesque may have maintained and even further perpetuated negative stereotypes.

In Davis’s 2010 essay “Constructing Normalcy” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, the author locates the ideology of “normalcy” within a set of overlapping discourses on statistics, intelligence testing, and eugenics to emerge around World War I.<sup>44</sup> Susan Currell and Christina Codgell’s co-edited 2006 anthology *Popular Eugenics* expands on this framework by turning attention to the period of Great Depression, when scientific acceptance of eugenics was waning in the U.S., to explore the ways that a culture of eugenics continued to permeate popular entertainment. In the field of art history, Barbara Melosh’s 1991 study *Engendering Culture* is one of several studies to focus on the relationship between gender and aesthetics in public art in relation to the promotion of physically strong bodies. These contributions as well as the recent attention to statistics, “averaging,” and vernacular psychology in the fields of American studies and cultural history have provided useful starting points for examining the intersections between graphic satire and a broader set of discourses on normalcy and embodiment.<sup>45</sup> In many ways, I

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<sup>42</sup> Lennard J. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” in *The Disabilities Studies Reader*, third edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3-19.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” 3.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” 3-19.

<sup>45</sup> A number of studies have explored the explosion of psychology as a major field of study in this period, as well as the subsequent explosion of vernacular forms of psychology in the form of self-help books, radio programs, and the like. For an overview of changes in the field of psychology, see Philip Cushman,

see this dissertation as a contribution to these broader efforts to deconstruct, question, and analyze the material mechanisms involved in delineating social norms.

Finally, I want to make a note on the artists at the center of this project, who are all male and all white. When I was conducting my initial research to narrow down my project, I was especially struck by the relative lack of women working within a comic grotesque mode of graphic satire. I knew that the twenties and thirties had many female satirists and that the complex sexual politics of the 1930s have been one of the key ideological sites of meaning during the Depression, but I was surprised to find that most female satirists chose a subtle set of comic tools or only used provocative imagery selectively.<sup>46</sup> Consider the short-lived caricature career of Peggy Bacon, for example, who art historian William Murrell called a sensation in 1934 when reviewing her mocking takes on such well-known celebrity figures as Alfred Stieglitz, depicted as a rather feeble looking old man (fig. 6). Although her work was admired by

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*Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995). Elizabeth Lunbeck, who focuses on the development of the field in Boston in the early twentieth century, draws heavily from Foucault to consider psychology as a discourse of power, in Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). For rich discussion of vernacular psychology and its potential impact on American culture, see Allison Miller, "Am I Normal? American Vernacular Psychology and the Tomboy Body, 1900-1940," *Representations* 122, no. 1 (2013), 23–50. For a discussion of the phenomenon of nervous breakdowns see Megan Barke, Peter N. Stearns, and Rebecca Fribush, "Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 3 (2000), 565–84. See also Julia Grant, "A 'Real Boy' and Not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890-1940," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (2004): 829–51, for a broader understanding of psychology as it relates to masculinity. Grant connects stigmatization of "sissies" to changes in childhood psychology. On the concept of "average," Sarah Igo has investigated the rise of surveys, sociological case studies, and public polling as formative in a white middle-class construction of average. See Sarah Igo, *The Averaged Citizen: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Many of these figures were virtually unknown in art historical scholarship until fairly recently. For discussions of female artists in *New Yorker*, see Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*; for a discussion of female satirists and printmakers working from a politically radical perspective see Langa, *Radical Art*.

the critics, Bacon worried she was offending her subjects and quit rather abruptly in 1935.<sup>47</sup>

Mabel Dwight, a socialist and artist known for her anti-capitalist and anti-fascist cartoons in *New Masses*, also walked a fine line between the comic grotesque and more “nuanced” forms of critique, as she would explain in her own treatise on satire.<sup>48</sup>

In his study on the role of humor in modern American culture at the beginning of the twentieth century, historian Daniel Wickberg reminds us that women (and for that matter, men of color as well) who worked in humor were often examined with more scrutiny than white men—their works being thought to be a reflection of their own marginalized identities.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the discrepancies in forms of comic expressions suggests that many women harbored ambivalence about the social repercussions they would face by using a language that usually achieved its effect through cruelty. For many women, I would argue, a successful career in satire meant navigating the volatile language of the grotesque very carefully.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

My argument unfolds through a set of case studies that illuminate the range of concerns addressed through the comic grotesque in graphic satire. All of them—save for the first

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<sup>47</sup> Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature*, 257; see also Roberta Tarbell, “Peggy Bacon’s Pastel and Charcoal Caricature Portraits,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1988), 32-37.

<sup>48</sup> Describing her approach to political issues, Dwight argued suggestively, “Too much distortion would seem to be an immature resource—a noisy show rather than a subtle suggestion. Some of the young, class-conscious artists are too arrogantly vehement in their portrayals of vulgarity, ugliness, injustice, etc., and one is conscious of their agonized effort to twist the whole into a pattern of art.” Mabel Dwight, “Satire in Art,” in *Art for the Millions* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 153.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998), 92. In her own scathing account of the industry, cartoonist Betty Swords argues that it has long been nearly impossible for women to work in the industry because so many editors prefer cartoons that make women the objects of ridicule. Throughout her career, she was tasked to work on sexist cartoons, and was derided for taking the jokes “too seriously” if she complained about the content. See Betty Swords, “Why Women Cartoonists are Rare and Why That’s Important,” in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 65-84.

chapter—revolve around only one or two artists to allow for a deeper analysis. Chapter One lays out the historical and cultural landscape of the comic grotesque in the first decades of the twentieth century through an examination of a set of works in *The Masses* (1911-17)—the first major twentieth-century American journal to make graphic satire using the comic grotesque idiom—about the dehumanizing impact of World War I. These images, I argue, offer a glimpse into emerging concerns about the politicization of the body by the state that will subsequently become one of the organizing themes of grotesque satire of the Great Depression. This chapter uses a multilayered examination of these critiques to lay the historical groundwork for the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter Two examines *The New Yorker* cartoonist James Thurber's unsettling cartoon narratives from the early 1930s of furtive males who are repeatedly thwarted by aggressive, crazed, or impatient females, arguing that these largely overlooked works act as provocative and culturally significant commentaries on middle-class manhood in the wake of the Depression. These works, I argue, were designed to challenge a set of cultural expectations of middle-class manhood rooted in the capitalist values of hard work and moderation, and tied to the period's obsession with psychological and physical fitness as measures of success. The alternative they presented gave vivid form to communal anxieties around middle-class masculinity and gender relations that the modern preference for efficiency and progress largely repressed. To make this case, I locate the works within a larger set of discourses focused on issues of anxiety and nervousness—especially within the fields of psychiatry and vernacular psychology—that had emerged in the interwar period as major frameworks for analyzing progress in society. Thurber cast his women as grotesques in these images. Their bodies, I argue, are highly gendered symbols of the pressures of responsibility for middle-class men at the beginning of the

Depression. I also argue that Thurber's narratives of masculine defeat are fictive constructions designed to diminish women's recent accomplishments and register anxiety over them as well.

Chapter Three pairs the works of two lesser known artists from the period—Jacob Burck and Gardner Rea—who were both active within politically radical publications and who both used strategies of the comic grotesque to launch what I interpret as multi-layered critiques of the New Deal in its early years of implementation. Treating their works comparatively, I focus my analysis on a set of disruptive satires that used the images of injured veterans and chain-gang workers, respectively, to associate New Deal work programs with more obvious instances of government exploitation of its citizens. These works offer an entry into deeper understanding of communal concerns about the relationship between the citizen and the state among leftists during the interwar period.

Chapter Four explores the language of the comic grotesque as a strategy of critique against the fascist enemy, focusing especially on Gropper's caricature of Emperor Hirohito, published in *Vanity Fair* in 1935, one of the earliest known caricatures of the emperor and the source of Japanese government outrage. In this and other images of the Japanese enemy, I argue, Gropper channeled collective anxieties among Americans—particularly the working class—about the foreign “other” to forge an enemy that was at once marked as barbaric, exotic, violent, and deformed. At the same time, his works drew on the liberties of American freedom of expression, while openly transgressing boundaries of representation within Japanese fascism that characterized Hirohito as a sacred symbol of the Japanese state.

Throughout these case studies, I position the comic grotesque as a symbol of the anti-authoritarian spirit in a period when social dynamics were thrown into flux. In this way, the satires in this dissertation also shared important qualities with the unruly, rebellious, and often

explicitly ethnic comic voices that flourished in film and radio, and with the subversive performances in minstrelsy and carnival sideshows. Humor in this period became a key testing ground between different expressions of American culture.<sup>50</sup> The artists I examine joined such diverse figures as Charlie Chaplin, social realist artist Philip Evergood, filmmaker Tod Browning, and novelist Nathanael West to defiantly embrace an American vision that was unstable, at times gleefully vulgar, and often explicitly intended for immigrant and working-class communities.<sup>51</sup> Yet even more importantly, in a period when understandings of the body as a smooth-functioning machine were celebrated, and strong healthy bodies were embraced across the political spectrum as symbols of progress, the comic grotesque stood apart as a form of critical engagement that foregrounded somatic experience, with the goal of creating a more vulnerable and dynamic sense of self.

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<sup>50</sup> In her study on the history of the radio, historian Susan S. Douglas argues these debates played out on a regular basis on the radio. Not all of the radio personalities in this period came from ethnic backgrounds, but many did. Susan J. Douglas, "Radio Comedy and Linguistic Slapstick," in *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 100-23.

<sup>51</sup> As works designed to address a middle-class audience that made up the majority of the readership at *The New Yorker*, Thurber's work stands apart as an exception. Yet even these images are defiant. As I explore in Chapter Two, their insistent focus on anxiety constituted a striking alternative to period expectations of middle-class manhood. For more on Chaplin in relationship to the grotesque, see David Robb, "Carnavalesque meets Modernity in the Films of Karl Valentin and Charlie Chaplin," in *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture, and Politics in Film*, ed. Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim (London: Wallflower Press, 2006); for more on Nathanael West and Tod Browning in relation to the comic grotesque, see Nancy Bombacci, *Freaks in Late Modernist Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006). Evergood's use of the grotesque has only received limited attention, but a brief discussion of his aesthetics can be found in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 183. The most complete published study to this date on Evergood's artistic career, which includes numerous examples that draw on the grotesque idiom, is Kendall Taylor, *Philip Evergood: Never Separate from the Heart* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987).



INTRODUCTION FIGURES



Figure 1: Jacob Burck, "Roosevelt's Offer to Veterans," *Daily Worker* (13 May 1933).



Figure 2: "Spirit of CCC," 1930s.



Figure 3: James Gilray, "Monstrous Crawls, at a New Coalition Feast," 1787.

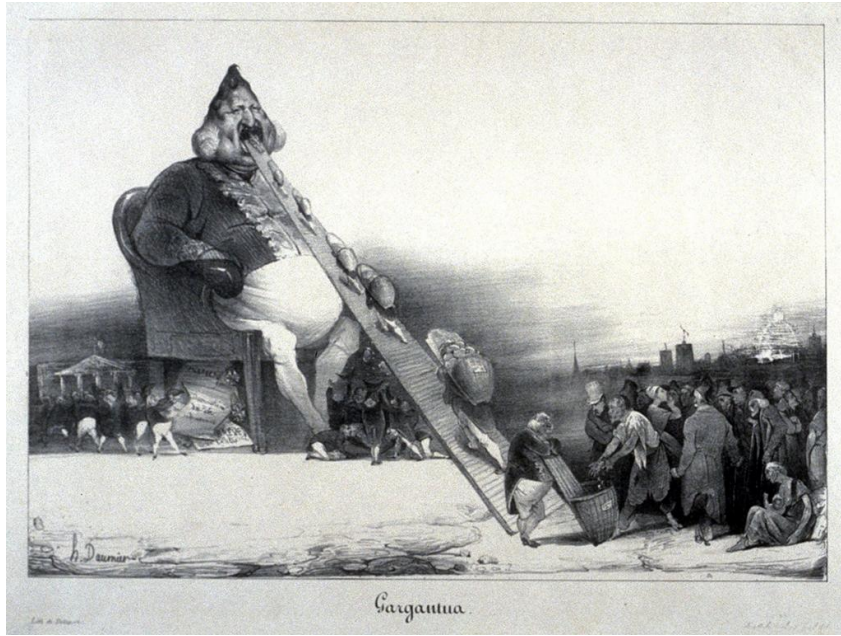


Figure 4: Honoré Daumier, "Gargantua," 1831.



Figure 5: Thomas Nast, "What are You Laughing at? To the Victor Belong the Spoils?," in *Harper's Weekly*, 1871.

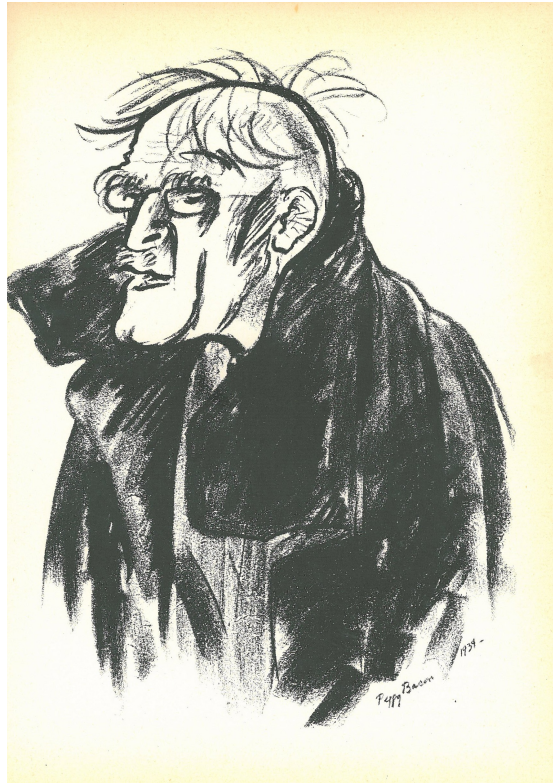


Figure 6: Peggy Bacon, *Alfred Stieglitz*, 1934.

## Chapter One:

### **PERFECT SOLDIERS AND MODERN CITIZENS: *THE MASSES AND THE COMIC GROTESQUE***

Robert Minor's "A Perfect Soldier," a lithograph published in the leftist-Bohemian journal *The Masses* in July 1916, is a deeply unnerving work of anti-war satire (fig. 1.1). At the center of the image stands a man with his arms crossed. This figure is huge, white, incredibly muscular, shirtless, and headless. A much more diminutive man with an army uniform stares up the large figure's chest and clasps his hands. This smaller fellow's mouth is open, signifying that he is the "Army Medical Examiner" in the caption that reads: "Army Medical Examiner: At last, a perfect soldier!" Even without the caption, the smaller man's upward gaze and gesture registers a sense of enthusiasm about the giant headless man before him.

What is it about this muscle-bound headless form that makes it so "perfect" to this man? Above the smaller man is a sign with the words "MEN WANTED FOR THE ARMY" and "MEASUREMENT." At the time that *The Masses* published this satire, World War I had been going on in Europe for nearly two years. The phrase "Men wanted for the Army" links the giant figure to heated debates about whether—and to what degree—Americans should participate in the conflict abroad. The word "Measurement" on the sign corresponds with a machine standard: a body at its most "efficient," perhaps, to use a word invoked frequently in the period in relation to performance ideals. The musculature of the body is an impressive display of strength, but the contained headless body is all brawn and no brain. The image is a jarring distortion of heroic images of bravery that still permeate the popular imaginary of WWI. The effect of this contained, yet headless, "perfect" soldier is unsettling—and while Minor's anti-war stance is clear, the implications of this giant incomplete body are also suggestive of broader socio-political themes.

In the 1910s, the strategy of the comic grotesque so vividly expressed in Minor's image emerged for the first time in American art as a prominent strategy of satirical engagement. The satirical monthly *The Masses* (1911-17), where "The Perfect Soldier" appeared, was the veritable ground zero for these potent expressions. Under the editorship of socialist writer Max Eastman, the magazine operated as an intellectual and cultural hub for the Bohemian left, publishing a wide array of art, satire, poetry, fiction, and commentary. In evocative displays of twisted, broken, and even surveyed bodies, artists at the magazine challenged the growing powers of the state—embodied most readily in American's engagement with WWI, but also expressed in strike-breaking tactics and legislation restricting free speech.<sup>1</sup> Before the federal government shut it down under the auspices of the 1917 Espionage Act, *The Masses* was also one of the most prominent anti-war magazines in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> The anti-war satires at *The Masses* provide a particularly rich entry into early twentieth-century engagements with the strategy of the comic grotesque.

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<sup>1</sup> The years preceding WWI were marked by a number of strikes that erupted in violence, with state and federal officials taking the side of corporations. Police were involved in breaking up the famous silk mills strike in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1913. In 1914, the National Guard was called in to break up a strike at Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company in Ludlow, Colorado, discussed in the final section of this chapter. More than thirty men, women, and children died in the clashes between the workers and the company. For more on both of these events, see Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses: A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911-1917* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 89-91. Another manifestation of the growing power of the state that post-dates *The Masses* slightly is the Palmer Raids of 1919-20, led by U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, which led to more than 500 foreign citizens being deported for their radical political positions.

<sup>2</sup> The Postmaster General shut down *The Masses* after its September 1917 issue was mailed out. The government charged that several items in the July 1917 issue violated the newly created Espionage Act, which held that no individual should make "false reports or false statements with the intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States." The violation led to two criminal trials—both of which ended in hung juries. By the time the trials were over, the magazine had been out of circulation for over a year and many of the staff members had moved on to other projects. For a detailed examination of the events around *The Masses*'s demise, see John Sayer, "Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression: *The Masses* Magazine Versus the Government, 1917-1918," *The American Journal of Legal History* 32, no. 1 (January 1988), 42-78. Sayer includes the full text of the Espionage Act on page 45.

This chapter takes up three works from *The Masses* that make the dehumanizing effects of WWI their urgent theme: Minor's "Perfect Soldier" (July 1916); John Sloan's lithographic satire captioned "His Master: 'You've Done Very Well. Now What Is Left of You can go back to Work'" (September 1914); and Henry Glintenkamp's "Physically Fit" (September 1917) (figs. 1.1-1.3). I analyze these works against one another, using their similarities and differences as a starting point to introduce the comic grotesque as an important mode of critical engagement in the U.S. in the early twentieth century.

Minor was already an established satirist for radical publications by the time he had started contributing to *The Masses* in 1915. He had started as a cartoonist at the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in 1904 before moving to Paris to study satire, and then to New York City in 1913. He quit his first New York job at the *New York World* because their support for the war conflicted with his radical political beliefs. Minor was closely involved in Anarchist politics at the time that "The Perfect Soldier" was published.<sup>3</sup> Sloan, who is best known in American art for his paintings of urban life, was also a Socialist activist and politician until 1916, who ran for public office multiple times between 1911 and 1913. In 1912, he helped to reorganize *The Masses*, which had struggled its first year as a Socialist publication, and he was on the editorial board when he published his anti-war satire.<sup>4</sup> Glintenkamp had also been active as a cartoonist when he

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<sup>3</sup> Minor traveled to Paris with financial assistance of *St. Louis Post Dispatch* newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer. Notably, his political radicalism evolved through his career. In the early 1910s, he had been a Socialist. In the 1920s, he would join the Communist Party and later run as a Communist for several state and national government positions. For more details about Minor's life and career, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 180.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Sloan's involvement at *The Masses*, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 32-35 and 181. For an examination of the relationship between Sloan's socialist activism and his art, see Patricia Hills, "John Sloan's Working-Class Women: A Case Study of the Roles and Interrelationships of Politics, Personality, and Patrons in the Development of Sloan's Art, 1905-1916," in *Reading American Art*, ed. Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; orig. 1980), 311-49; and Gail

joined *The Masses* in 1913, though his work was mostly confined to commercial publications. The year that Glintenkamp made his satire, he fled to Mexico as a conscientious objector to the war.<sup>5</sup>

The works by these respective artists share a number of similarities that encourage a broader thematic analysis. Most prominently, in all of these satires the artists use the soldier as a motif, augmenting his body in ways that raise larger questions about his political and symbolic value. In Minor's work, the body of the soldier is incomplete—although the head is not so much severed as simply gone. Minor used a heavy crayon to outline a slight bump where his cranium should be. The effect of this choice renders the static figure, with arms folded tightly, as distinctly unnatural. But what really makes the work so disturbing, however, is the smaller man's delight in this monstrous body.

In Sloan's lithograph, the soldier's body is also incomplete, though this component of the image registers quite differently. Sloan's soldier has been violently severed in half. The mangled figure—still alive—drags what is left of his entrails behind him as he returns from battle to check in with his “master,” a robust man whose plump body fills the space of a padded chair. The two figures form a striking contrast to one another. The macabre appearance of the soldier's body—from his tangled guts to his enlarged hands—resists sentimentalizing, even as his injuries make explicit the war's physical costs.

Glintenkamp's image is the only satire to depict the soldier's body whole and healthy. Yet the figure is vulnerable nonetheless. The soldier is shown standing upright, with his arms

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Gelburd, “John Sloan's Veiled Politics and Art,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 1 (2008), 69–88.

<sup>5</sup> Glintenkamp's commercial publications included book illustrations and a stint drawing cartoons for *Hudson Dispatch*. After fleeing the U.S., he ended up spending the next seven years in Mexico. For more details about Glintenkamp's life and career, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 179.



down, almost as if he were at attention—except that he is completely naked and holds a sheet of paper in front of his groin area. He is a young man, slender but muscular, and well proportioned—or, as the title of the work indicates, he is “Physically Fit.” But “fit” how, and for what purpose? Glintenkamp’s answer to these questions is quite unsettling. He depicts a skeleton measuring the naked man’s body, presumably for a coffin lying behind them.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these images, I will argue, was designed to upset familiar perceptions of soldiers promulgated in the period in a number of ways, including through “Preparedness” pro-military rhetoric, wartime posters, and wartime legislation. I hope to also prove that the ways these artists augmented the soldier’s body raised larger questions about the politicization of the body by the state more generally. In this way, these works participated within a set of debates at *The Masses* around the socializing impulse of American capitalism, which have only recently gained critical attention in American art scholarship.<sup>7</sup> They also play a key role within a much longer historical trajectory of the comic grotesque concerned with autonomy of the self in modern America.

### ***THE MASSES, WORLD WAR I, AND ART HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP***

My focus on anti-war satire from *The Masses*, specifically, counters the common tendency within American art history to downplay the later years in the magazine’s history. It also builds on the work of American Studies scholar David Holloway, who in his 2005 essay “Visualizing Dissent in World War I” directly addressed this scholarly absence by resituating the

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<sup>6</sup> The figure also shares striking similarities to the body type used in eugenics manuals and eugenics exhibitions held in the U.S. in the 1920s. See Mary K. Coffey, “The American Adonis: A Natural History of the ‘Average American’ (Man), 1921-1932,” in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. Susan Currell and Christina Codgell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 185-216.

<sup>7</sup> The next section engages with this scholarship in detail.

anti-war works within a set of discourses related to corporate capitalism.<sup>8</sup> Most studies of *The Masses* published before his contribution have focused their attention largely on Max Eastman's formative role as the publication's chief editor, have explored the loose sketch-like aesthetic that typifies the magazine's imagery, or are studies devoted to individual artists or themes.<sup>9</sup>

Eastman became the chief editor of the magazine in 1912 and is credited for helping to transform the monthly into a vibrant satirical publication after it flailed for about a year under the editorship of its socialist founder Piet Vlag. A Dutch émigré and chef at the socialist education center, Rand School for Social Sciences, Vlag had conceived of the magazine in very narrow (and unmarketable) terms, as a promotional publication for socialist worker cooperatives.<sup>10</sup> Eastman kept the anti-capitalist tone of the magazine that had been important to Vlag's conception, but opened up its contents to a larger constituency with an eclectic assemblage of contributors whose political perspectives ranged from libertarian to socialist to anarchist. His approach to content was frank and irreverent, and attracted artists and writers who had been

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<sup>8</sup> David Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent in World War I: Modernism, and the End of 'Liberal' Progressivism, in *Art from The Masses (1911-1917)*," in *American Visual Cultures*, ed. John Beck and David Holloway (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 63–72.

<sup>9</sup> For examples of general histories, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*; Leslie Fishbein, *Rebels in Bohemia: The Radicals of the Masses, 1911-1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Thomas A. Maik, *Masses Magazine 1911-17* (New York: Garland Science, 1994); and Richard Fitzgerald, *Art and Politics: Cartoonists of the Masses and Liberator* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1973). For a closer examination of the prints, see Benjamin Goldstein, "Daumier's Spirit in American Art," *Print Review* 11 (1980), 127-44; and Francine Tyler, "The Impact of Daumier's Graphics on American Artists: c. 1863-1923," *Print Review* 11 (1980), 109-26. Chapter 3 in Zurier's study also focuses on the aesthetics. An example of a thematic study includes Rachel Schreiber, *Gender and Activism in a Little Magazine: The Modern Figures of The Masses* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> During his brief tenure at as the magazine's editor, Vlag's tone was one of moral uplift. His content included classic Marxist literature, such as Tolstoy fiction, and the content leaned heavily towards overt didacticism. The images he selected for the magazine tended more towards a very conservative, classicizing idiom, with a heavy emphasis on allegorical subject matter. Eastman almost immediately abandoned this style and tone for a more outwardly rebellious, and at times even vulgar, spirit that he and his colleagues affiliated with the working class. For more on the early *The Masses*, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 121-25.

censored elsewhere for their anti-capitalist perspective.<sup>11</sup> As socialist activist, cartoonist, and regular contributor Art Young explained, “We wanted one magazine which we could gallop around in and be free.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, the group involved in the magazine welcomed controversy and often flouted censors with satires and stories that mocked conservative sensibilities. A favorite target, for example, was Anthony Comstock, president of the New York Society for Prevention of Vice, a private organization that worked with the police in New York to suppress art and literature they considered obscene. Minor’s 1915 image “O Wicked Flesh!” is one of numerous works to mock the man (fig. 1.4).<sup>13</sup> In this particular image, the artist satirizes the figure as a pudgy and diminutive man with an overblown obsession about nudity. Comstock was one of several figures who tried, to no avail, to shut down *The Masses* in the early years of its run.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars interested specifically in the style at the magazine have largely tied the magazine’s sketch-like aesthetic (evidenced in the works by Minor, Sloan, and Glittenkamp) to the staff’s blunt anti-establishment stance. They have shown that the group looked to Europe, with its long tradition of radical graphic satire, for inspiration. Influences included French nineteenth-century artist Honoré Daumier, whose works appeared in *Le Caricature* and *Le Charivari*, and French Impressionist-era artist Jean-Louis Forain, whose prints appeared in the magazine *Le Rire*. Other influences also included the periodicals *Similicissimus*, *L’Assiette au*

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<sup>11</sup> Minor’s decision to join *The Masses* exemplifies this move.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Minor also made the work captioned “Your Honor, this woman gave birth to a naked child!” that was published in September 1915. This satire shows a pudgy Comstock dragging a woman into court by her scruff.

<sup>14</sup> *The Masses* faced several threats of lawsuits over the years before the government finally shut the magazine down. For more on these attempts, see Zurier, *Art of the Masses*, 44-45. See Zurier, 96, for more on Comstock’s attempts, specifically.

*Beurre*, *Jugend*, and *Der Wahre Beurre*, among others.<sup>15</sup> In her history of the magazine, Rebecca Zurier has shown that artists discovered these various works in a variety of ways. Sloan, for example, was introduced to Daumier through his mentor, urban realist Robert Henri, who had elevated the artist as the supreme chronicler of “real life”—willing to explore all walks of society in his prints. He also became an avid collector of nineteenth-century work.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Minor first came into contact with works by Daumier, Forain, and others during his time studying in Paris in 1912.<sup>17</sup>

According to Zurier, for many of the artists, including Sloan and Minor, Daumier’s style, in particular, became tied to “personal handwriting”—embodying the “human qualities that made an artist great.”<sup>18</sup> *The Masses* artist Boardman Robinson’s views on Daumier are representative: “There was a man! ... His drawings came daily, directly, and hot off his mind ... one cannot separate the man from his craft.”<sup>19</sup> For each artist, Zurier emphasizes, Daumier’s work thus had specific significance. While Sloan was drawn to the sense of compassion in many of Daumier’s realist works, such as his well-known *Third Class Carriage* (1864), Minor was drawn to the sharp and pointed caricature images such as “Gargantua” (1831) (see intro fig. 4). This difference derives in part from their distinct backgrounds of these two figures: Sloan saw himself as a painter first and was invested in capturing the lives of common people; Minor had developed

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<sup>15</sup> For more on the various European influences, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 32. Benjamin Goldstein’s and Francine Tyler’s respective essays on the influence of Daumier on American art are among the earliest to demonstrate visual similarities between the artists involved in the magazine and Daumier’s works. See Goldstein, “Daumier’s Spirit in American Art,” and Tyler, “The Impact of Daumier’s Graphics on American Artists: c. 1863-1923.”

<sup>16</sup> According to Patricia Phagan, Sloan owned 12 volumes of *Le Charivari* and about 800 Daumier lithographs. See Patricia Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*: A Study of his Political Cartoons, 1924-1935,” Ph.D. Dissertation (New York: City University of New York, 2000), 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> See Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 129-39. For more on the broader impact of Daumier on *The Masses*, see also Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*,” 72-83.

<sup>18</sup> Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 130.

his career as a political cartoonist and was drawn to the ways that Daumier's satire translated moral outrage into drawn form. Minor wrote in a 1922 essay, Daumier "tells you to love and hope—yes, and to hate them that don't love and to kill 'em too. Yes, it tells you to live and breed and fight..."<sup>20</sup>

The anti-war satire from *The Masses*, which dominates the magazine's last two years of content, sits awkwardly within these broader historical studies. Because of disagreements about Eastman's management practices, the last two years of the magazine were marked by constant tension.<sup>21</sup> Many of the best-known artists—including Sloan, in fact—had left by the time the government shut the magazine down in late 1917. For this reason, scholars have tended to treat the last years of the publication as a period of decline and have subsequently given the works published during these years considerably less attention.<sup>22</sup> Some scholars have also argued that the magazine's antiwar position itself reflected a certain naiveté. This position is conveyed in especially pointed terms in historian Thomas Maik's 1994 history of *The Masses*. Maik writes, "*The Masses* group had illusions, not dreams, and those illusions prevented them from coping with reality once they found themselves in an adult world."<sup>23</sup> This approach has had the effect of dislodging the later work from the broader project of radical expression and the larger themes of civil liberties, free expression, and anti-capitalism that were part of the magazine from the very beginning.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Minor, "Man X, His Mark: Comment on an Exhibit of Drawings by Boardman Robinson," *Liberator* 5 (April 1922), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Some had trouble with his commitment towards anti-war activism; others were critical of the editorial control that Eastman held. For the details on these tensions, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 52-58.

<sup>22</sup> This is exemplified in both Zurier's main text for *Art for the Masses*, as well as that book's Introduction by Leslie Fishbein (pp. 3-28), which is really an overview.

<sup>23</sup> Maik, *Masses Magazine 1911-17*, 173-74.

These narratives have privileged certain aspects of the history while downplaying or ignoring others. For example, as Zurier notes, many of the people who left in the last two years of the magazine's run felt that Eastman had taken too strong an anti-war position. Either they were more ambivalent about the war than the editor or believed the magazine should allow for more open debate.<sup>24</sup> This may be true, but it is also worth noting that if Eastman's position alienated some artists on this issue, it also attracted others including Minor, who had left *New York World* in 1915 because of its pro-war position. The magazine was a genuine refuge for those who fundamentally believed that the war was wrong. And in the months before it was shut down—after the U.S. joined the war effort—it was one of the only publications in which readers could find strong dissent of American policies towards the war.<sup>25</sup>

WWI also gave *The Masses* a sense of focus that it had lacked in its earlier volumes. Despite its experimentalism and energy, the early issues were riddled with cultural and political contradictions on subjects ranging from sexual revolution to race, sometimes within the body of a single artist's contributions.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, the later issues operated with a more cohesive dialogical framework. The commentary on conscription in Glintenkamp's "Perfect Fit," to name but one of many examples, anticipated a column by Floyd Dell in a later issue that featured

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<sup>24</sup> One of the artists who ended up supporting the war was George Bellows, who had contributed several works between 1912 and 1914, but who quit the magazine around this time period. Sloan harbored concerns as well—not so much about the magazine's position on the war specifically, but on Eastman's decision to make the magazine an explicitly anti-war magazine. Sloan disengaged from politics shortly after this period. See Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 52-58.

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting here that when the war initially broke out in 1914, debate was more open and widespread. *The New York Times*, for example, published a series of editorials in September and October 1914. The other news outlet's approach to their coverage changed after the U.S. joined the war effort in response. This was likely in response to the federal government's requests for unity on the issue, though the espionage act of 1917 restricting free speech also likely played a role.

<sup>26</sup> Frequent contributor Stuart Davis, for example, made images about blacks that ranged from celebratory to caricature. For more on the contradictory content of the magazine, see Leslie Fishbein, "Introduction," in *Art for the Masses*, 4-5 and 16-17.

letters from conscientious objectors in England.<sup>27</sup> The magazine may have had a more serious tone, but it is unfair to regard this shift as a decline.

In his own response and discussion of this later period, Holloway also notes that some of the criticisms in the scholarship seems motivated as much by political as aesthetic judgments. After all, the magazine continued to publish a rich array of imagery, including figural, abstract, and formalist artwork throughout this period.<sup>28</sup> Holloway raises an important question in his response: has this bias made for a skewed reading of the later contributions? To more productively position the anti-WWI related images in *The Masses*, he argues for a different kind of historicizing that re-integrates these images within the magazine's broader ethos of radicalism. More specifically, he connects these later works to concerns about civil liberties and class relations, two of the of the magazine's most enduring themes.

Eastman and his anti-war colleagues approached WWI from a socialist perspective. They treated it as an imperialistic war backed by industrial capitalists that would sacrifice all workers for their own greed.<sup>29</sup> The war was thus something they could not abstract from the broader economic and class histories in which it was formed. Consider socialist journalist and staff member John Reed's numerous comments about the war, published on a regular basis from 1914 to 1917, as an example of this broader understanding. "The real war, of which this sudden outburst of death and destruction is only an incident, began long ago," Reed argued in the opening months of the conflict. "It has been raging for tens of years, but its battles have been so

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of Dell's work, see Sayer, "Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression," 56.

<sup>28</sup> Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent," 63-64.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion, see Fishbein, "Introduction," 25; Sayers, "Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression"; and Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent," 64.

little advertised....”<sup>30</sup> In March 1915, he persisted, “As for the bloody side of war, that shocks people less than they think; we’re so accustomed to half a million a year maimed and killed in mines and factories.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, in a strong condemnation of America’s possible entry into war in 1916, he again summons the “war” at home in his attack—a war in which “workingmen employed by our great financial ‘patriots’ are not paid a living wage.”<sup>32</sup>

Holloway uses this understanding of WWI to place the anti-war satire in *The Masses* within a broader historical framework that takes into greater consideration how the war abroad reflected the “war” at home, and vice versa. He focuses especially on the corresponding preference for continuity, rationality, and efficiency that characterized both war ideology and the corporate initiatives developed in the first two decades of the twentieth century as tools for speeding up production and managing workers.

Business executive Frederick Winslow Taylor is among the best known figures involved in developing and promoting these ideas within the corporate setting; his theories were codified in his influential treatise *The Principles of Scientific Management*, published in 1911. An engineer by training, Taylor had spent most of his career examining the factory system and managerial practices with the explicit goal of improving and rationalizing those operations. By the late 1890s, Taylor was advocating for more systematic management techniques, such as stopwatch time studies that identified and timed individual aspects of jobs with the goal of

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<sup>30</sup> John Reed, in an essay published in *The Masses* in September 1914, quoted in Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent,” 64.

<sup>31</sup> John Reed, “The Worst Thing in Europe” orig. publ. March 1915, reprinted in *John Reed for The Masses*, ed. James C. Wilson (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 1987), 135.

<sup>32</sup> John Reed, “Whose War?,” orig. publ. April 1917, reprinted in *John Reed for The Masses*, ed. James C. Wilson (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 1987), 165.



eliminating wasteful activities.<sup>33</sup> His efforts complemented Henry Ford's development of assembly line practices for mass production, a system that regularized labor into discrete repeated actions. On the consumer side of this economic equation, the period also marked the expansion of market driven art in commercial magazines and advertising created for to sell the mass-produced products created within this more regularized system.

The system of management developed by Taylor, Holloway emphasizes, was based on an idea of efficiency that tended to treat humans like machines, colonizing the body in the service of capitalist efficiency for the interests of elites. Wartime ideology, he argues, could be seen as an intensification of this understanding of the body. Male citizens were expected to go to war—and expected to follow orders once in the Army; factories were also expected to make weapons with an efficiency that would meet urgent demands. As Holloway notes, even before the U.S. officially entered into the war, it was invested in the conflict. The U.S. had been sending armaments to support the allies since 1915.<sup>34</sup> The war also marked the first mass propaganda campaign, led by George Creel, a journalist hired by Wilson to run the Committee on Public Information. During the war, more than four million posters were disseminated around the U.S.<sup>35</sup> As *The Masses* patron Amos Pinchot suggested in 1917, within wartime ideology lurked an effort to “mould the United States into an efficient, orderly nation, economically and politically controlled by those who know what is good for the people.”<sup>36</sup> The anti-war images, Holloway

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Nelson, “Frederick Winslow Taylor,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*, ed. Joel Mokyr (Oxford University Press, online 2005), accessed online January 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent,” 64.

<sup>35</sup> For more on George Creel, see the biographical study, Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). The numerical statistic for the poster campaign comes from Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Amos Pinchot, quoted in Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent,” 66.

argues, can be seen as a challenge to this process, and in some cases acted as powerful assertions of the *de-socialized* body.

Holloway uses the work “Woman Hurling Brick” by *The Masses* regular Maurice Becker, which was published in the December 1916 issue, to develop this component of his analysis (fig. 1.5). The image is the physical embodiment of revolt. Becker has captured a woman mid-stride with a brick raised in the air. He has cropped the work to isolate her form. All is motion, or as Holloway writes, “political energy”—whose negation of the socialized body is expressed in the “formal presentation of the body itself.”<sup>37</sup>

But the composition alone is not the only aspect of the work that challenges the corresponding ideologies of war and scientific management. Holloway also draws our attention to Becker’s layering of crayon lines, roughly drawn, that run more or less horizontal across the page, echoing her forward motion and the “raw, untrammelled momentum” of revolt itself.<sup>38</sup> For Holloway, the unfinished, sketch-like technique in this work and so many others in the magazine was a central component of the magazine’s protest. The expressiveness of the line, he argues, was the semiotic equivalent to negation of efficiency expressed in assembly line production and standardized products, as well as the growing fields of commercial art and advertising.

Holloway argues that this self-conscious craft aesthetic, in which the “artist is visible in the shaping of every line,” simulated the space beyond the “deskilling, surveillance and mechanization of labour characteristics of early Fordist production.” One of Holloway’s central goals in his essay is to reintegrate the artists at *The Masses* into a modernist discourse from which they are often separated because of their tendency towards representational forms. In

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<sup>37</sup> Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent,” 70.

<sup>38</sup> Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent,” 69.

Becker's work, he argues convincingly, we see Expressionism portrayed in collective and class terms.<sup>39</sup>

Of the three works in this chapter, only one—Minor's "The Perfect Soldier"—appears in Holloway's essay. In an all-too-brief statement, Holloway argues that the satire visualizes the "body in wartime as the continuation and intensifying of 'peacetime' socialization."<sup>40</sup> This interpretation—while lacking in details—opens up a productive framework to begin to analyze all three of the works in this chapter. Minor, Sloan, and Glintenkamp, in their respective images, made the themes of obedience and self-abdication central. In Minor's and Glintenkamp's works, the artists also visualize this military form of servitude through strong bodies that evoke the ideals of efficiency in embodied form. In addition, both of these works make explicit references to quantification. In Minor's work, this concept is expressed in the mention of "Measurement" on the poster; in Glintenkamp's work, the skeleton measuring the soldier is a more disconcerting reference to this idea. Finally, all three artists used a drawing technique that shows their unique presence; visually their style presents a hand-crafted alternative to more commercialized forms of visual production.

Holloway's approach is also valuable because it lays the foundations for a set of debates, confrontations, and issues that come to the fore in the 1930s—when President Franklin Roosevelt expanded the government's powers greatly in the name of economic efforts, and when concurrently the authoritarian ideology of fascism was demonstrating its growing influence abroad.<sup>41</sup> Yet Holloway's concerns also leave room for larger questions, particularly in relation to the motifs and satirical strategies used by Minor, Sloan, and Glintenkamp.

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<sup>39</sup> Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent," 69, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent," 66.

<sup>41</sup> These issues are taken up in much more detail in Chapters Three and Four.

For one, Holloway has little interest in the particular motifs and symbols through which ideological formations were promulgated. Nor is he interested in the role of these symbols, for that matter, in mystifying the realities of the war. The figure type of the soldier, which is used in the works by Minor, Sloan, and Glintenkamp, was a critical motif in debates around the war. For some pro-war advocates, the soldier's vigorous and youthful body was very expression of freedom.<sup>42</sup>

Holloway's approach also ignores the roles that gender and race played within the socialization of the body as it pertained to war. In her study on the impact of war on WWI soldiers in Great Britain, historian Joanna Bourke has emphasized that cultural expectations of masculinity were closely intertwined with perceptions of modern war.<sup>43</sup> Historian Christopher Capozzola, meanwhile, has demonstrated that the march to war in the U.S. was forged at least in part in relation to communal anxieties about the changing demographics of America, and fears of too much foreign influence in the U.S.<sup>44</sup>

Holloway is interested in locating the works within a framework of modernism. He reads them, within this context, as modes of negation. By emphasizing individual agency over the centralizing power of the state, his argument creates a useful dialectical construction for understanding some of the most fundamental issues facing Americans in the early twentieth century, when government powers were expanding. However, in casting these works through

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<sup>42</sup> This was critical to the discourse of the Preparedness Movement, for example, as discussed in the next section. The association between soldiers and freedom still persists to this day.

<sup>43</sup> See Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>44</sup> One material example of this racial bias is the "100 percent" America message adopted by pro-war enthusiasts and the coercive tactics of the American Protective League to force people to sign up for the draft. See Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 31-33, 41-54, and 55-82, for a discussion on both these concepts.

this lens, he overlooks the ways that some of the anti-war satires in *The Masses* were also designed to elicit an immediate, even somatic reaction from the viewer as well.

Consider, for example, his reading of Minor's "Perfect Soldier" as an image that visualizes the "socialization" of the modern body. Certainly, as he implies in his discussion, the bulky muscular figure, headless and his pose compact, offers a striking image of blind obedience. But the gigantic scale of the figure—and the unnatural way the top of his body curves upwards where the head should be—also summons more gothic associations of threatening monsters as well.<sup>45</sup> Sloan's and Glintenkamp's works are also designed to unnerve with their references to violence and the ways they destabilize conventional understandings of duty, fitness, and service. In Sloan's work, the artist has created an impossible scene of freakish violence: a man dragging his entrails behind him as he holds the front half of his body up with his two large hands. In Glintenkamp's work, the artist breaks down the boundaries between the political imaginary of the proud dutiful soldier and the risks that come with that service. The framework of the comic grotesque—with its emphasis on boundary pushing and destabilization, and its insistence on embodied experience—provides a way to further press the interpretation beyond negation. With this in mind, let us look more closely at period understandings of the soldier himself.

## **SOLDIERS, CITIZENS, AND THE PREPAREDNESS MOVEMENT**

For anti-war activists at *The Masses*, few figure types embodied the grotesque absurdity of the modern nation state—and the attendant concerns about power, coercion, and assaults on

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<sup>45</sup> Here, I am thinking specifically of both Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818), with the Creature, a product of a scientific experiment; and Washington Irving's "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819), with its Headless Horseman. Notably in Irving's story, the Headless Horseman was thought to be a Hessian soldier from the Revolutionary war whose head had been destroyed by a cannonball.

civil liberties within a capitalist society—more than the WWI soldier. In a March 1915 essay in the monthly, John Reed expressed a common sentiment:

I hate soldiers. I hate to see a man with a bayonet fixed on his rifle, who can order me off the street. I hate to belong to an organization that is proud of obeying a cast of superior beings, that is proud of killing free ideas, so that it may more efficiently kill human beings in cold blood. [sic]<sup>46</sup>

Over and over during the war years, *The Masses* staff and contributors argued that the modern soldier was the very opposite of heroic—an emblem of defeat against what contributing editor Floyd Dell memorably called the “stubbornness of the free soul.”<sup>47</sup>

This point of view was rooted at least in part in the soldier’s seeming lack of autonomy. The soldier embodied a total abdication to state control. “Military service plants in your blood the germ of blind obedience, of blind irresponsibility,” wrote Reed, “that it produces one class of Commanders in your state and your industries, and accustoms you do what they tell you even in peace time.”<sup>48</sup> However, for contributors at *The Masses*, the soldier also embodied something more sinister.

The soldier was a person who was appreciated for his strength and vigor, but his body was sent off to destroy or be destroyed. He was meant to be an expression of national values, but once in combat his actions were closely monitored. Soldiers did not so much represent what Holloway had called a “continuation and intensifying of ‘peacetime’ socialization,” as a perversion of those values. Bodies were especially vulnerable in WWI, the first major conflict fought with modern technologies of destruction such as artillery fire and landmines. The war was fought mostly in trenches, where men would sit for weeks—months—stalled out in mud and

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<sup>46</sup> John Reed, “The Worst Thing in Europe,” 137.

<sup>47</sup> Floyd Dell, in an introduction to a group of letters by conscientious objectors published in *The Masses*, 9, no 10 (1917), 29, reprinted in full in Sayer, “Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression,” 56. The trial includes several references to soldiers that represent these larger concerns about this figure type.

<sup>48</sup> Reed, “The Worst Thing in Europe,” 137.

bloodied waters as they waited for directives or for the other side to attack. In his discussion of soldiers, Reed remarked on the psychological effects of horrifying reality. “I could describe to you the quiet, dark, saddened streets of Paris,” he wrote of a trip to Europe in 1915, “where every ten feet you are confronted with some miserable wreck of a human being, or a madman who lost his reason in the trenches, being led around by his wife.”<sup>49</sup> In industrial capitalism, working bodies were used in repetition; scientific management practices were created to make this process more efficient. In both industry and war, individuals were denied moral and physical agency. But in modern war, however, working bodies were literally expendable—or more, a social disgrace—when individuals returned from the battlefield injured, maimed, or with post traumatic shock.

It is important to note that the outrage expressed in Reed’s statements about soldiers was not centered on the individuals, for whom the writer himself harbored deep sympathy, but on the dehumanizing effects of military service.<sup>50</sup> It was the willingness to destroy—and conversely, be destroyed—at the orders of someone else’s authority and logic that made the concept of the soldier so fundamentally grotesque. The critiques by Minor, Sloan, and Glintenkamp were part of this larger political discourse expressed by Reed and Dell. On the most fundamental level, they acted as visual analogues to Reed’s condemning critique.

Yet as vivid images designed to unsettle viewers, they also operated as forms of complex engagement within a broader discourse around the soldier discussed and debated by the government, pro-military activists, and the broader American public. To adequately examine the

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<sup>49</sup> Reed, “The Worst Thing in Europe,” 134.

<sup>50</sup> Reed’s sympathy is expressed in this very essay in his lament of “inexhaustible hordes of simple peasants torn from their farms” and the “saddened streets of Paris, where every ten feet you are confronted by some miserable wreck of a human being” who has had to succumb to a stint in the war. Reed, “The Worst Thing in Europe,” 134.

messages within these specific images, we must more closely consider the objects of their critique, the wartime ideology and imagery used to support it.

In the U.S., many of the ideas that formed the basis of *The Masses*' critique had been forged within a political ideology known as the "Preparedness Movement." Developed almost immediately after the war broke out in Europe in August 1914, the Preparedness Movement began as a critique of the position of neutrality that President Wilson had adopted in accordance of most Americans' views before reversing his position in 1917. Wilson and much of the public ignored the Preparedness Movement until May 1915, when German U-boats sank the *Lusitania*. By the summer of 1916, Wilson's administration had absorbed much of the Movement's rhetoric into their own policies, which included the National Defense Act that had been enacted to expand the military. In April 1917, when Wilson formally declared war on the German Empire, he drew heavily on the general framework of Preparedness ideology to make his case.<sup>51</sup>

In late September 1914, former President Teddy Roosevelt (and fervent critic of President Wilson) published an editorial in the *New York Times* that laid out the foundations of the Preparedness Movement's criticisms against neutrality. Roosevelt countered the oft-spoken belief in the early years of the conflict that WWI was the "last great war" by treating the situation abroad as a dire warning. In effect, he repositioned war, more broadly speaking, as a trans-historical reality instead of an episodic historical event. He used this framework to summon a frightening image of America as deeply vulnerable nation with a "terrible price to pay for unpreparedness." Roosevelt used this striking political imagery to justify greater military

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<sup>51</sup> In his speech supporting the Selective Service Act, for example, President Wilson evoked the calls for obligatory citizenship invoked, as we will see in the following pages, in Preparedness rhetoric. For a general overview on this history, see Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*. See also Jonathan Vincent, "'Tendrils of Association': World War I Narrative and the U.S. Political Imaginary," *American Literature* 82, no. 3 (10 September 2010), 553–81.



strength at home: “it is imperative that we shall take the steps necessary in order, by our strength and wisdom, to safeguard ourselves against such disaster as has occurred in Europe.”<sup>52</sup>

The cornerstone of the Preparedness Movement, not surprisingly, was a robust and highly organized standing army that would be ready to defend the nation if the country was attacked. Advocates for the cause insisted that a standing army would also ward off potential invasions, since a show of strength is far more convincing than the use of mere treaties alone.<sup>53</sup> Although Roosevelt is perhaps the best-known Preparedness advocate, one of the most influential figures regarding this aspect of the movement was Major General Leonard Wood. A former Chief of Staff who still had close ties to the federal government, Wood was involved in starting summer military training camps for private citizens in Plattsburgh, New York, in the summers of 1915 and 1916.<sup>54</sup>

Wood was a vocal advocate for conscription as well as reserve officer training programs, with the goal of having a prepared mass reserve army at the ready. In 1915, he published *The Military Obligation of Citizenship*, which codified the views of many preparedness activists. As his text emphasized, one of the critical components of Preparedness was a vision of the body politic that centered on what Christopher Capozzola describes as “obligatory citizenship.”<sup>55</sup> Wood wrote in his treatise, “manhood suffrage means manhood obligation for service in peace or

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<sup>52</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Col Roosevelt Writes on What America Should Learn from the War,” *New York Times* (27 September 1914), SM1. For more on the rhetorical construction of war as a trans-historical reality, both within political debates and within literature of the period, see Vincent, “Tendrils of Association,” 565.

<sup>53</sup> See for example, Roosevelt’s discussion of Belgium; Belgium’s treaty of neutrality meant nothing to Germany, which marched across the country in the initial days of the war. See Roosevelt, “Col Roosevelt Writes on What America Should Learn from the War.”

<sup>54</sup> These Plattsburgh Camps, as they were known, trained around 40,000 men, all college graduates. Capozzola mentions the Plattsburgh camps in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24. For another discussion of the camps, see Vincent, “Tendrils of Association,” 563-64.

<sup>55</sup> This concept is the cornerstone of Capozzola’s thesis in *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*.

war.”<sup>56</sup> The Preparedness Movement held that the tradition of voluntary military service was a failure of American democracy. In the works of one architect of the Preparedness Movement, Major General Hugh Scott, “There is no reason why one woman’s son should go out and defend ... another son who refuses to take training or give service.”<sup>57</sup>

The Preparedness advocates argued that universal conscription was no real departure from American traditions, citing the Revolutionary “Minutemen” as an example of a long tradition of military service. They also argued that conscription would teach the value of duty and obligation. “Military service,” argued pro-conscription enthusiast former President William Howard Taft, “will impress this counter obligation on the young man [and] teach him the value of respect for authority, of subordination to a lawful superior, and of the sacredness of his allegiance to country.”<sup>58</sup> Conscription was both a means of “Preparedness” and a process of socializing the citizen.

As Capozzola emphasizes in his analysis, the talk of conscription was also rooted in the belief that it was more effective than any voluntary army. A “purely federal force” that was properly managed, Wood argued, would be the only way to guarantee the best “organization of the resources of the country.”<sup>59</sup> Human beings were resources, and within this framework, as a 1916 War Department memo noted, voluntary recruitment was “undemocratic, unreliable, inefficient, and extravagant.”<sup>60</sup> Capozzola notes that these views positioned “obligations to the nation ahead of all other obligations and favored the federal government as the institutional

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Wood, quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 25.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24.

means of organization.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the Preparedness Movement treated citizens as an auxiliary of the nation that, if properly managed, would be able to confront any enemy at will. But this philosophy also demonstrates the adaptation of corporate principles of scientific management for the purposes of defense to the nation, as is discussed in Holloway’s essay on *The Masses*. Or as anti-war leftist Randolph Bourne explained in 1916, conscription was “sham universality.” It “irons out all differences of talent and ability” and makes “mere machines of uniform, obeying youths.”<sup>62</sup>

The Preparedness Movement’s promotion of conscription depended on a process of mystification. It not only framed the military as the highest form of duty but an expression of one’s love of the American values of individuality and freedom. Preparedness ideology hinged on the vision of a seamless relationship between the individual and the state bonded intimately together in a higher purpose of protecting a vulnerable America. Magazines, books, and movies were all used for the promotion of the cause. The Plattsburgh School, developed by Wood, also helped the movement gain support. Frequent editorials about the growing threat of Germany, particularly after German U-Boats sank the *Lusitania* in May 1915, also gave the movement a sense of urgency.<sup>63</sup> Commercial art was also employed for the Preparedness cause, which paved the way for the U.S. government’s official war propaganda campaign after it declared war and enacted the Selective Service Act—which finally instituted universal conscription—in the spring of 1917.

A poster for the Plattsburgh School illustrates the effort, for example, to tie the ideology of Preparedness to the nation’s history of military defense (fig. 1.6). Minutemen had been self-

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<sup>61</sup> Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Randolph Bourne, “The Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service,” quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> For more on the rhetoric around these events, see Vincent, “Tendrils of Association,” 553–81.

trained colonists who had formed militias in the Revolutionary War, and within the Preparedness Movement were viewed as the original defenders of American values against European imperialism. A volunteer army of patriots, they exemplified a willingness to serve the country. The Preparedness Movement was rooted in a belief that every male citizen should similarly put military service ahead of any other personal obligation; in the ideal world, conscription would be unnecessary because everyone would already willingly serve. The artist of the poster depicts the contemporary figure with the same facial features as the Minute Man, drawing a strong visual connection to past. This, in itself, is notable. One of the concerns of the Preparedness movement had been the growth of immigrant populations who—in their vision—posed a threat to traditional values.<sup>64</sup> The link that the artist makes between the earlier figure and later one represses the changing demographics of America, privileging an Anglo tradition of national identity. Notably, the artist changed the pose of the contemporary figure, who unlike the more historical soldier, is more poised, more alert, and with gun at the ready. The message was subtle yet clear: the modern world of global conflict required a more organized military machine made of more alert, efficient, and organized individuals.

This idea is also conveyed in another poster from the same series that shows Plattsburgh trainees marching in time (fig. 1.7). Their bodies are a display of the efficient system of military power that the Preparedness Movement so desired. But the figures are not completely identical. Their movements work in harmony—in synchronicity of step—but each figure's body also conveys its own individuality. Contemporary values about manhood were embedded within this process of mystification. Through the use of strong healthy male bodies, Preparedness conflated

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<sup>64</sup>See Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 55-82, for a discussion on racial bias and concerns about immigration as it related to citizenship.

abdication of personal interests for the interests of the community with ideals of American manhood.

Some illustrations, such as James Montgomery Flagg's memorable image of Uncle Sam, were used in both the Preparedness Movement and the wartime period (fig. 1.8). The work originally appeared on the July 16, 1916, cover of *Leslie's Illustrated*, where it appeared accompanied by the heading "What are you Doing to be Prepared?" In 1917, the War Department repurposed it with the caption "I Want You" for military recruitment posters.<sup>65</sup> In the second context, it supported the Selective Service Act, which required all male citizens of draft age to register at the draft office. Selections were based on family obligations and "usefulness."<sup>66</sup>

Flagg's image of Uncle Sam was designed to help Americans understand their relationship to their government at this moment. It imagined the complex workings of war machine as a stern familial figure. The foreshortened hand, as art critic WJT Mitchell has noted, was designed to transfix the individual on the other end.<sup>67</sup> Flagg had used his own facial features to articulate the stern expression. He had probably borrowed the pose from Alfred Leete's 1914 military recruitment poster feature Britain's Secretary of State for War (fig. 1.9). But he shifted the pose slightly, so that his head is tipped down slightly instead of straight forward. In his own analysis of the work, Capozzola notes that the seriousness of expression conveys the unique

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<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of the work's creation, see Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 3-8; Carlo Ginzburg, "'Your Country Needs You': A Case Study in Political Iconography," *History Workshop Journal* 52 (Autumn 2001), 1-22; WJT Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33-38.

<sup>66</sup> For more on the selective service's parameters and specific goals, see President Wilson's address on the Selected Service Act. Woodrow Wilson, "President Woodrow Wilson's Address Establishing Conscription," May 18, 1917.

<sup>67</sup> Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 36-37.

circumstances, while the silly hat and suit is a reassuring gesture—a slightly comical touch that suggests extraordinary circumstances, “the nation, like its uncle, would rather be doing something else.”<sup>68</sup> The work also creates an illusion of intimacy between two individuals. At the same time, the slightly downward position of Uncle Sam’s gaze suggests a subtle hierarchy of power and deference.

Of course, going to war entailed more than fulfilling one’s duty. As Mitchell emphasizes in his reading of the image, the longer range Uncle Sam’s pointed finger was to “move and mobilize the beholder, to send him on to the ‘nearest recruiting station’ and ultimately overseas to fight and possibly die for his country.”<sup>69</sup> These various images obscure the terrible risks to the body that awaited young men after they signed up for military duties, which risked both physical dismemberment from artillery fire and grenades and mental breakdowns. These images also obscured how their country might treat them upon their return.

In Reed’s commentary of the soldier written in 1915, he questioned the idea of a “Standing Army” in and of itself. He suggested an alternative: “a chance to construct someday a Democracy, unhampered by the stupid docility of a people who run to salute when the band plays.” Preparedness, he argued, offered no defense to a “world thirsty for our blood.”<sup>70</sup> Within the ideology of preparedness, American men were expected to express their nation’s values of freedom and democracy through their bodies. But paradoxically, these same bodies were besieged on all sides by the military that expected them to sign up and follow their commanders unquestioningly towards possible doom. As Reed insisted, always lurking behind the patriotic calls for war was terrible, absurd violence and bloodshed. Nothing about the organized military

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<sup>68</sup> Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Reed, “The Worst Thing in Europe,” 137.

was actually rational. The invocation of healthy regulated body in political rhetoric and posters repressed these facts. These concerns were central to the critical discourse of *The Masses*, and consequently to our understanding of the works by Minor, Sloan, and Glintenkamp.

## THE MODERN SOLDIER AS GROTESQUE

The respective works by Minor, Sloan, and Glintenkamp focus their attention on the grotesque absurdity underlying this ideology the Preparedness Movement. They confront a political imaginary of the soldier's body as expressions of a nation's strength and willingness to defend Democracy with a set of vivid images centered on the various ways that male bodies were besieged. Focusing on the experiences of soldiers, these works engage the political discourse of the grotesque that literary theorist Kenneth Burke articulates in *Permanence and Change* (1935) as "the perception of discordancies cultivated without smile or laughter."<sup>71</sup> Although Burke's ideas around the grotesque postdate this period, his discursive formation is useful in this context. For Burke, the grotesque was a willfully oblique stance designed to agitate viewers—to dislodge them from the socializing process. The "grotesque" could serve as a way to awaken popular audiences from their "trained incapacity," as he called it. Burke believed the grotesque could be revolutionary.<sup>72</sup>

The satires by Sloan, Minor, and Glintenkamp, use the comic grotesque in a number of ways with the goal of breaking down the process of mystification employed in the pro-war rhetoric. The resulting satires replace the heroic ideal of the soldier with a far more unstable image of citizenship, with the result that perspectives towards on this figure type oscillate between sympathy and outright terror.

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<sup>71</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 1935 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 112.

<sup>72</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 7-10, 112.

First, in Sloan's work, which is the earliest of the three, the lithograph acts as a cruel satirical inversion of Major Leonard Wood's definition of manhood suffrage as "obligation for service in peace or war."<sup>73</sup> Although Sloan's image predates Wood's major treatise *The Military Obligation of Citizenship*, by the time his satire was published military enthusiasts like Roosevelt were already arguing that pacifism was not only un-American but that "those responsible for the unpreparedness would be guilty of a crime against the nation."<sup>74</sup> *The Masses* may have very well been addressing Roosevelt's views directly with Sloan's image.<sup>75</sup> The work was published at almost exactly the same time as when Roosevelt's editorial appeared in the *New York Times*.

Maimed from the waist down, the soldier in Sloan's drawing is anything but the strong and efficient figure promulgated within the Preparedness Movement's rhetoric. The soldier drags what is left of his body along the ground with two large hands. Sloan articulates the figure's bottom half as a tangled mess of viscera that begins somewhere in the shadows near his abdomen and trails off into the distance towards the plume of dark smoke in the upper right quadrant of the image.

That he is literally broken in half is a central component of Sloan's critique. As Joanna Bourke emphasizes in her study of WWI related disabilities, so much of the pro-war rhetoric depended on the subject of the male body as able-bodied and complete.<sup>76</sup> Sloan's work not only attends to the potential risks of war service, but also highlights the central paradox of his ideology. Whole, strong bodies were sent off to defend their nation, with the explicit goal to either destroy other men's bodies or to have their own bodies killed or maimed.

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Roosevelt, "Col Roosevelt Writes on What America Should Learn from the War," SM1.

<sup>75</sup> On this issue, it's clear the staff wanted Sloan's work to make an impact; it appeared on a two-page spread across the centerfold of the issue.

<sup>76</sup> See Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, especially 31-75.



Sloan also uses the language of the comic grotesque in another key way within this narrative. This broken body is a visual complement to the loss of independence invoked in the narrative structure itself. The man has dragged his body before “his master,” depicted as an obese man in a suit who sits on a padded chair. This rotund figure, who recalls Daumier’s famous caricature of King Louis Philippe in “Gargantua,” holds what looks to be a coin as a pittance for the soldier’s service (see intro fig. 4). The exchange of money at the center of the composition between the two gives this critique an economic subtext.

Sloan, who was a socialist when he made this work, would have viewed the war in economic terms as an expression of imperialist ambition. Notably, within this context, the soldier’s hat with a feather, which formally echoes the shape of the plume of smoke in the distance, is vaguely reminiscent of the style of the period’s German uniforms.<sup>77</sup> At the time that this work made, supporters of neutrality often linked the U.S. policy of universal conscription to Germany’s autocratic policies. Sloan’s work visually elicits what former Harvard President Charles Eliot described in a *New York Times* editorial published the same month as the “primitive savagery” of the “the whole process of competitive armaments, the enlistment of the entire male population in national armies and the incessant planning of campaigns against neighbors.”<sup>78</sup>

Yet just as notable to the work is the fact that the man in the chair has no distinctive markings of a nationality. Sitting in luxury, well-fed and well-dressed, this characteristic “banker figure” stands in for power overseeing war itself. In this way the work resists a topical reading. Sloan opens up the possibility for the work to be read metaphorically as a commentary of the capitalist construction of the nation state.

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<sup>77</sup> I discovered this through an online image search of German uniforms.

<sup>78</sup> Charles W. Eliot, “Probably Cause of the European War,” *New York Times* (4 September 1914), 8.

Minor's and Glintenkamp's works also engage the grotesque, though their critiques of pro-war rhetoric are rendered differently. Like Sloan, Minor is probably responding directly to the ideology of obligatory citizenship invoked in the Preparedness Movement's calls for stronger military, not only by leaders of the movement like Roosevelt and Wood but also by a wide array of popular publications that had taken up the cause by the time he made his image. Minor's work forms a particularly striking dialogical relationship, for example, to Flagg's image of Uncle Sam, which appeared in its original iteration on the cover of *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* the very same month that "The Perfect Soldier" was published. The "Perfect Soldier" in his satire gives striking bodily form to the imaginary citizen standing across from Uncle Sam—an overblown body without a head but plenty of heft for destruction if given the opportunity. Whether or not Minor knew Flagg's work is not vital to this reading, since he would have been well aware of the Plattsburgh Movement that Flagg's work recalled with its call for Preparedness. One of the more unsettling components of the Preparedness Movement was its appropriation of the ideals of scientific management. Minor responds to the Preparedness Movement with this figure who seems both monster and machine: headless, giant, and imposing yet static and physically contained.

Whereas Sloan's work concentrated on the physical *costs* to such duty, the exaggerated body of the Minor's print is a vivid symbol for the military as what Reed described in his 1915 essay "The Worst Thing in Europe" as "an organization that is proud of obeying a cast of superior beings, that is proud of killing free ideas, so that it may the more efficiently kill human beings in cold blood."<sup>79</sup> The Army Medical Examiner's eyes zero in on the bulky arms in front of him that so distinctly contrast with his own diminutive features. Minor's heavy crayon marks

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<sup>79</sup> Reed, "The Worst Thing in Europe," 137.

along the headless soldier's arms and chest draw attention to his muscles as well as his looming presence, more generally.

Of the three critiques, Glintenkamp's comes closest to an elegy. The seemingly straightforward image of a skeleton measuring a man for his coffin foregrounds the cruel fact that soldiers' lives were at risk. On this basic level, the work is designed to elicit sympathy to the men who went out to the front. Yet there are several features in the work that offer up more complex meanings. Note, for example, that the figure holds a piece of paper to cover his groin. This element likely represents the man's draft papers; its position gets down to the basic physical stakes of manhood. As President Wilson stated in his speech about the Selective Service Act, during wartime the nation placed explicit value on how each citizen was "best fitted."<sup>80</sup> Glintenkamp's image is a work of deconstruction; it breaks down the conceptual space between the call to serve and the soldier's experience. Glintenkamp reportedly made the work in response to a newspaper article that announced the Army's plans to place mass orders for coffins.<sup>81</sup> The display of boxes piled up behind the figure elicits the aggregate of soldiers who were selected and trained in anticipation of their potential death.

The stack of coffins also elicits some of the concerns that Holloway had discussed in his essay on the anti-war work from *The Masses* regarding the wartime ideology's similarities to corporate ideology in this period. The coffins are a haunting metaphor for the dehumanizing impact of obligatory citizenship. In his critique of conscription discussed earlier, Randolph Bourne argued that military service "irons out all differences of talent or ability."<sup>82</sup> Glintenkamp's work extends this argument in productively unsettling ways.

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<sup>80</sup> Wilson, "President Woodrow Wilson's Address Establishing Conscription."

<sup>81</sup> This is noted in Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 60.

<sup>82</sup> Bourne, quoted in Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 25.

## LABOR, EFFICIENCY, POWER, AND VIOLENCE

The works by Minor, Sloan, and Glinkenkamp share themes of obedience, self-abdication, concerns about duty, and ideals of efficiency that are all central components of Holloway's argument. All of them, in this respect, can be read as commentaries on the efforts to socialize the body within twentieth-century America. But all three also consider how wartime ideology created a grotesque perversion of these ideals. They do so by destabilizing perceptions of the soldier-citizen through confrontational imagery that renders the more violent aspects of military service explicit.

With these issues in mind, I would like to return to the ideological framework of *The Masses*' anti-war critique and consider these anti-war images within a broader framework that gives Holloway's argument new dimension. Holloway focuses almost exclusively on the social practices of the Progressive era concerned with the management and socialization of the laboring body to serve capitalist objectives. The development of administrative techniques, commercial advertising, and the like, he notes, lent themselves to "the private interests of capital, and to attempts by elites to contain (while reproducing) the inequalities and contradictions structuring capitalist-democratic life in the United States."<sup>83</sup>

These practices can certainly be seen as a form of socialization. But in the 1910s, corporate initiatives such as scientific management and assembly line production were far from the only means by which capitalist and government interests exercised their control. The years leading up to the war were rife with violent forms of coercion, ranging from mob lynching to the

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<sup>83</sup> Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent," 64.

physical harassment of strikers.<sup>84</sup> Many of the concerns about the march to war by anti-war activists addressed fears of coercion shaped by this culture of violence. Once again, John Reed's words are especially striking. In a plea to the public written on the eve of the Selective Service Act, he wrote:

War means an ugly mob-madness, crucifying the truth-tellers, choking the artists, side-tracking reforms, revolutions, and the working of social forces. Already in America those citizens who oppose the entrance of their country into the European melee are called 'traitors,' and those who protest against the curtailing of our mere rights of free speech are spoken of as 'dangerous lunatics.' We have had a forecast of the censorship....<sup>85</sup>

And:

I have seen poor men sent to jail for long terms without trial, and even without any charge. Peaceful strikers, and their wives and children, have been shot to death, burned to death, by private detectives and militiamen. The rich has steadily become richer, and the cost of living higher, and the workers proportionately poorer.<sup>86</sup>

The works by Minor, Sloan, and Glitenkamp have greater meaning within this broader discourse of coercive violence.

Of the three works, Sloan's image is especially notable in this context and worth looking at more closely. We have already discussed how Sloan's macabre scene connects the war to a larger socialistic critique through the large man handing the money to the soldier who he tells to go to work. The work can be read in broad terms as a representation of *The Masses*'s anti-war position. But Sloan was almost certainly thinking also of a specific set of labor conflicts within the U.S. that had erupted around the time he made the image. The brief economic decline of 1913-14 had led to numerous strikes by the newly formed Industrial Workers of the World (hereafter IWW) and the violent retaliation of authorities. A supporter of the IWW's disruptive

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<sup>84</sup> Capozzola, in his study on obligatory citizenship, emphasizes the ironies of this dynamic; coercive forms of violence led many reformers to turn to the state for reform. The state, in turn, gained greater power within this dynamic. See Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 15-17.

<sup>85</sup> Reed, "Whose War?," 164.

<sup>86</sup> Reed, "Whose War?," 164.

political processes, *The Masses* had devoted considerable space to their organizational efforts.<sup>87</sup>

The bloodiest of these labor clashes occurred only a few months before war broke out abroad. In Ludlow, Colorado, miners had been striking at the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company since late 1913. In early 1914, national guardsmen and state militia joined private guards that had been hired by the company to harass strikers who had set up camps outside the company housing in Ludlow. To defend themselves, workmen brought in arms to the camp. As tensions rose that April, the harassers lit fire to the tents killing two women and eleven children; the subsequent battle that ensued between the militia and miners led to twenty more fatalities among the miners.<sup>88</sup>

Three months before *The Masses* published Sloan's grotesque image of the ripped apart soldier, it devoted an entire issue to the Ludlow Massacre. For the cover of that issue, Sloan created an illustration of a miner shooting a gun while holding a limp, burned child in his hands (fig. 1.10). Given that Sloan was directly involved with this earlier issue—and given his close involvement with the magazine more generally—it seems logical to assume that he had these domestic events in his mind when he made the later critique of the war.

The man in the earlier image is surrounded by a wash of red that represents the torching of the camp, but also evokes the bloodshed of the event. The work swirls with dramatic energy. Dark hash marks jut diagonally from the bottom half of the page towards the right corner. They disappear off the page, only to return against on the upper left side. A woman and her baby lie below the man. The woman's legs are recoiled. This man, facing his unseen enemy with a gun in his hand, forms a striking contrast to the limp lifeless body of the child he holds in his arms. This

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<sup>87</sup> For more on Eastman's views on the IWW, and the coverage of their strikes, see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 87-91.

<sup>88</sup> For a discussion on this and other events see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 90-91.

work, much like the “Woman Hurling Brick” by Becker discussed earlier, embodies revolt (see fig. 1.5). But here, the dramatic stakes are central to the power of the image. This work forms a striking pendant to Sloan’s later anti-war cartoon, linked by themes of violence but separated across time and space by first bloody battles of the war in August 1914. The earlier work shows determination. In the later work, by contrast, we see the defeat, grotesquely portrayed within the context of the war abroad.

The issue of *The Masses* that was devoted to Ludlow also included a work by Maurice Becker titled “Ammunition” that anticipated Sloan’s image even more explicitly (fig. 1.11). The depiction loosely resembled a battlefield with two sides firing artillery from large cannons. Yet this is not a battle in the conventional sense, for the cannons in the image are launching miniature human bodies—some whole, some mangled or destroyed. Becker worked in a loose lithographic line to create these forms. Notably, the men at the helm of the cannons these are not heads of particular nation states, but men in top hats. Visually, this macabre scene anticipates the socialist critique of WWI that *The Masses* would soon adopt. But the image also gives vivid symbolic form to the coercive tactics used to keep striking workers in line in this period.

Staff and contributors at *The Masses* often spoke of fight between labor and capitalism in dramatic terms. Reed, while covering the silk mills strike in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1913, was arrested and spent four days in jail. “There’s a war in Paterson,” he wrote:

But it’s a curious kind of war. All the violence is the work on one side—the Mill Owners. Their servants, the Police, club unresisting men and women and ride down law-abiding crowds on horseback. Their paid mercenaries, the armed Detectives, shoot and kill innocent people. Their newspapers, the *Paterson Press* and the *Paterson Call*, publish incendiary and crime-inciting appeals to mob-violence against the strike leaders...they control absolutely the Police, the Press, the Courts.<sup>89</sup>

To the anti-war left, capitalist society was always on the edge of violence. The management

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<sup>89</sup> John Reed, “War in Paterson,” *The Masses* 4 (June 1913), 14-17.

practices discussed in Holloway's essay were always intertwined with this broader network of practices to exercise and keep power.

During the wartime, the American left witnessed more coercive forms of power exercised in numerous ways. Reed's fears of censorship were justified when the government shut down the magazine under the auspices of the Espionage Act, enacted to suppress forms of free speech. The staff at *The Masses* found themselves on criminal trial for expressing their opposition, escaping prison because of a hung jury. Glintenkamp, after declaring his opposition to the war as a conscientious objector, lived in exile in Mexico for seven years. And during the Palmer Raids between 1919 and 1920, the Justice Department arrested and deported hundreds of leftists with the explicit goal of protecting American democracy.

As this chapter has shown, in this period the comic grotesque was a powerful alternative to the repression of the state, not only because it challenged authority but also because it honored and even encouraged somatic engagement as a means for greater awareness. Artists countered the repression of rights—and the repressive socialization of the body—with confrontational imagery designed to make explicit the terms of power and coercion.

In this chapter, I have looked at this strategy of engagement through the motif of the soldier in a period when obligatory citizenship developed as a strategy of the militarized nation-state. In the next three chapters, we will consider some of the different ways that artists used this satirical strategy during the Great Depression, a period marked by a related yet distinct set of concerns about the relationship between the state, society, and democratic citizenship.



CHAPTER ONE FIGURES

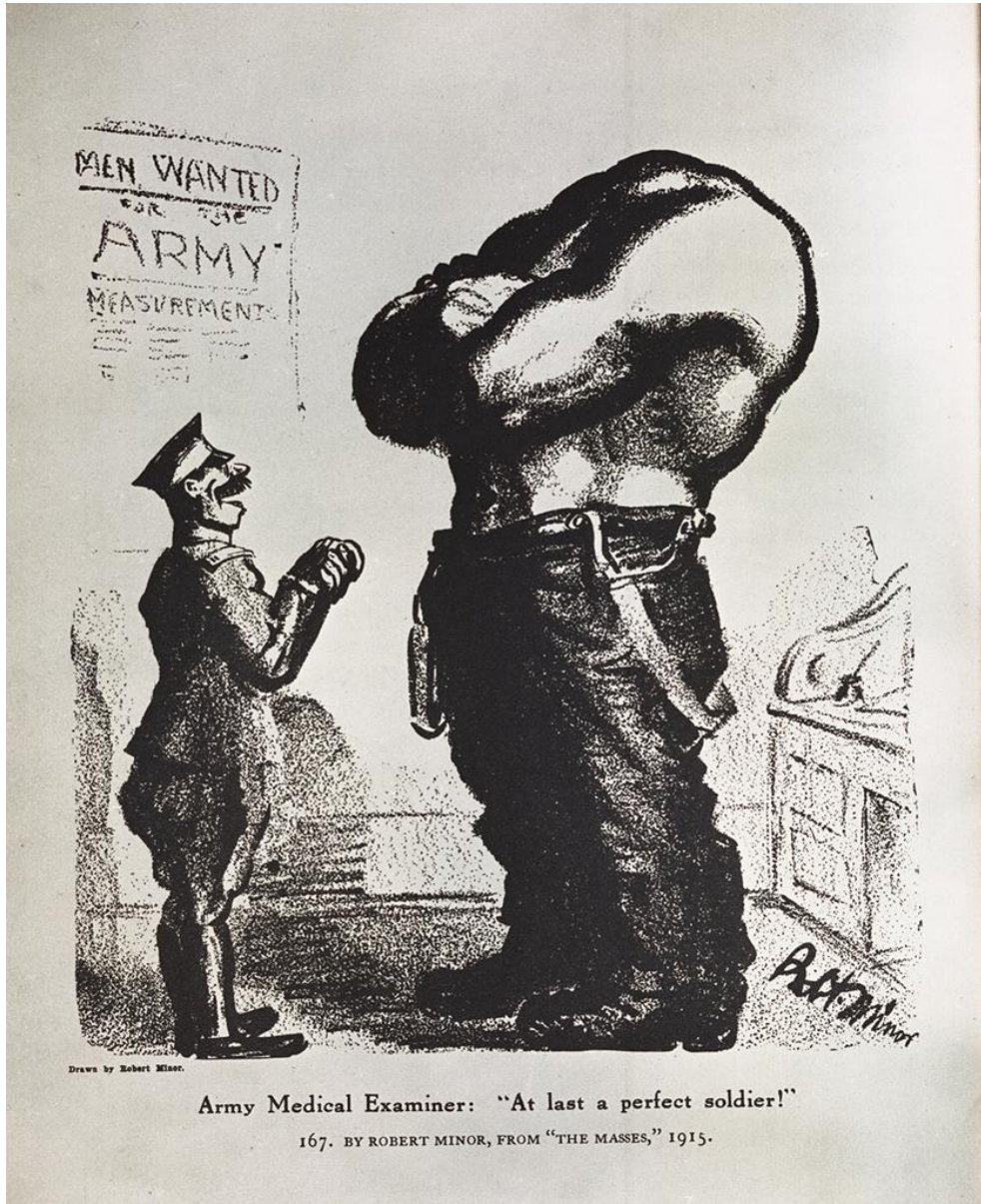


Figure 1.1: Robert Minor, "A Perfect Soldier," *The Masses* (July 1917).



Figure 1.2: John Sloan, “His Master: ‘You’ve Done Very Well. Now What Is Left of You Can go back to Work,’” *The Masses* (September 1914).

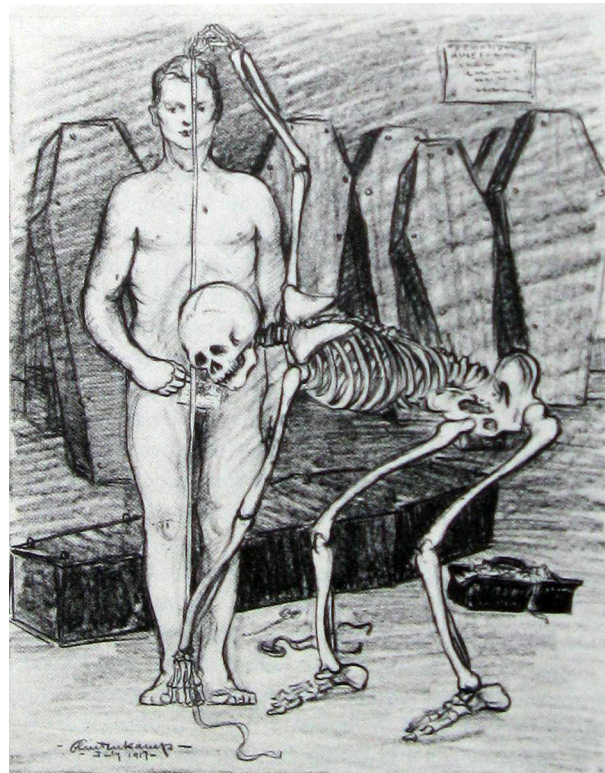


Figure 1.3: Henry Glintenkamp, “Physically Fit,” *The Masses* (September 1917).



Figure 1.4: Robert Minor, "O Wicked Flesh!," *The Masses* (October-November 1915).



Figure 1.5: Maurice Becker, "Woman Hurling Brick," *The Masses* (December 1916).



Figure 1.6: *The Minute Men of Today Are Going to Plattsburg*, lithograph poster, 1917.



Figure 1.7: *Are You Trained to Do Your Share? Plattsburg*, lithograph poster, 1917.



Figure 1.8: James Montgomery Flagg, *I Want YOU!*, 1917, first published as an illustration in *Leslie's Illustrated* in July 1916.



Figure 1.9: Alfred Leete, Recruitment Poster for Britain, 1914.

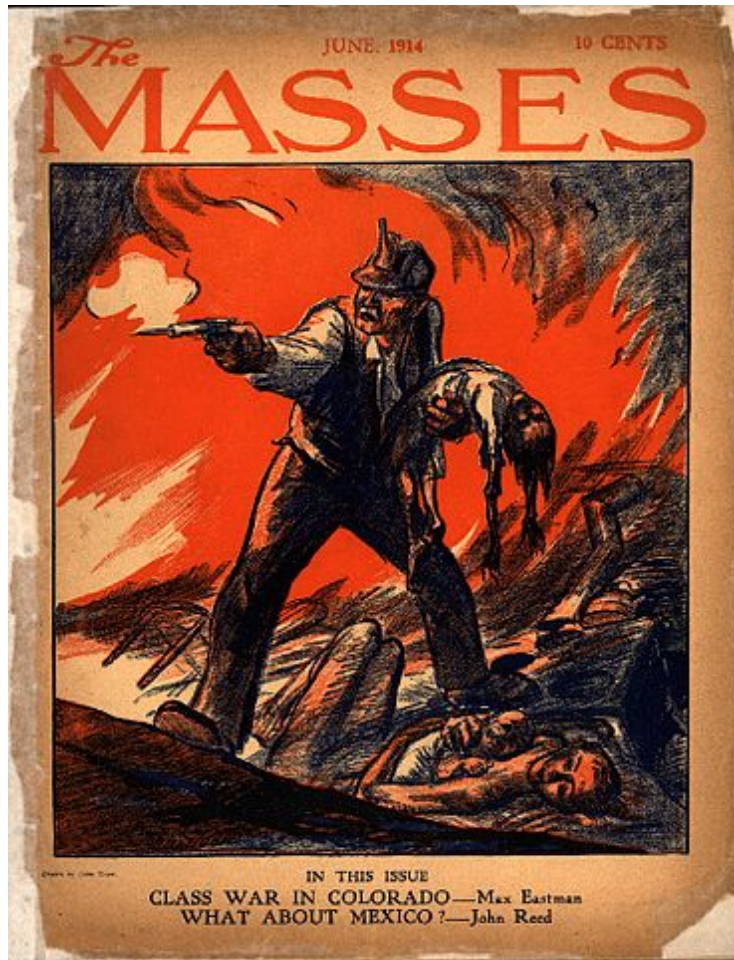


Figure 1.10: John Sloan, "Ludlow, Colorado," *The Masses* (June 1914), cover.



Figure 1.11: Maurice Becker, "Ammunition," *The Masses* 5 (June 1914).

## Chapter Two

### JAMES THURBER, MIDDLE-CLASS MANHOOD, AND THE “STARTLING PRESENT”

From 1931 to 1932, *The New Yorker* humorist James Thurber published a series of cartoons about middle class manhood that engaged in evocative ways with the satirical strategy of the comic grotesque. The series, which appeared in *The New Yorker* and the book compilation *The Seal in The Bedroom and Other Predicaments* (1932), was comprised of about forty single-panel drawings, each with a one-line caption of spoken dialogue (see figs. 2.1-2.6). The images focused on the dynamics between men and women in the arenas of urban social life where they most often interacted, such as the bedroom, the home, friends' apartments, restaurants, and parks. Thurber presented these sites not as locales for friendship or romance, but as contentious battlefields where the woman was almost always encroaching on whatever sense of independence the man in the scene had fostered. While this feature alone makes the works notable as commentaries on sexual politics of the interwar period, what sets them apart is Thurber's visual and structural articulation of the power dynamics of these images. The humorist used pictorial and narrative choices, I will argue in this chapter, designed to unnerve his mostly middle-class audience that made up the majority of the readership at *The New Yorker*.<sup>1</sup> These works used the comic grotesque, I contend, in ways designed to challenge a set of cultural expectations of middle-class manhood rooted in the capitalist values of hard work and moderation, and tied the 1920s obsession with physical and psychological fitness as a measure of social progress. The alternative they presented gave visual form to communal anxieties not only

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<sup>1</sup> The readership of *The New Yorker* is discussed in far more detail in a review of literature in the first section of this chapter, but for general discussions see Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (New York: Scribner, 2000); and Judith Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

about gender relations in the period but about the future of the nation itself at the beginning of the Great Depression.

A journalist by training who had cut his teeth working in newspapers in Columbus, Ohio; Paris, France; and New York City, Thurber had made this series of cartoons after already establishing himself as a columnist at *The New Yorker*.<sup>2</sup> *The New Yorker* had been designed by its creator and editor Harold Ross to appeal to sophisticated middle-to-upper-middle class urban audiences. Thurber had been working at the weekly for about four years before his series was published, making a name for himself with anecdotes about Manhattan, breezy fiction, and autobiographical musings.<sup>3</sup> The cartoon series from the early 1930s was his first major contribution to the magazine in visual form.<sup>4</sup> The images drew heavily on his most successful fiction at *The New Yorker* to that date: brisk comic tales of a so-called “little man” trying to escape the dullness and sense of confinement within his own life.<sup>5</sup> In both his stories and the drawings, Thurber focused on the man’s frustration towards the women around him.

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<sup>2</sup> In Columbus, his hometown, Thurber worked at his college papers *Sun-Dial* and *Lantern*, as well as at the *Columbus Dispatch*. In Paris in 1925, during a year abroad, he worked as a reporter for the Riviera edition of *Chicago Tribune*. In New York in 1926, he worked as a feature reporter for the *New York World*. Some of these biographical details will be explored later in this chapter. For a closer look at the particulars, see Harrison Kinney, *James Thurber: His Life and Times* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1995) and Neil A. Graur, *Remember Laughter: A Life of James Thurber* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Some examples of his work include his first short story, “American Romance,” published in 1927, and anecdotes in his regular contributions to the weekly column, “Talk of the Town.” See Kinney, *James Thurber: His Life and Times*, particularly 321-418, for more details on his work in these years.

<sup>4</sup> This was his first major series, but not the first time *The New Yorker* viewers saw his visual work. Before this series, Thurber made a few animal drawings to accompany his parody advice column, “Pet Department,” which appeared in the magazine in 1930.

<sup>5</sup> The term “little man” was attached to these works almost immediately. The term makes for a humorous moniker for the ordinary American, appearing on a diminished scale in a fast paced modern America. Thurber describes the man in the first of these stories, “American Romance,” published 5 March 1927, as a “little man in an overcoat that fitted him badly at the shoulders.” See James Thurber, “An American Romance,” reprinted in *Thurber: Writings and Drawings* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 943.



Several features within Thurber's cartoon series contribute to their destabilizing sensibility, linking them to the strategy of the comic grotesque. First, the tone of the cartoon narratives themselves is dark and ambivalent. This is different from Thurber's written stories, which tended towards a somewhat more buoyant, if wry, sensibility. "An American Romance" (1927), is fairly representative of his stories; in that tale a man is rewarded money for pacing a record amount of time in a revolving door. In his stories, Thurber often found a way to provide the "little man" with small victories of his own.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, his cartoons are unresolved, often evoking a certain sense of confusion or doom.

Thurber drew his cartoons in an uneven line technique that enhanced the strangeness of the narratives. Both the men and the women are distorted in some way, though he treated them differently. The man in these various cartoons typically appears small or furtive, his body often pudgy yet at the same time oddly flaccid. Thurber always worked in essentials—a few lines for his body, dots for eyes, and a dash for his mouth, which was perpetually downturned regardless of the narrative. The cartoon known as the "Seal in the Bedroom" is a striking example of how vital this component of the work is to the image's overall mood (fig. 2.1). An especially strange narrative within the series, this image depicts a fight between a husband and wife over a sound the man thought he heard. In the lower half of the image, we see the woman demonstrating her frustration with the man's suggestion. Her large mouth and heavy angled brow succinctly convey aggravation. Looming above them—unbeknownst to both of them—is the very seal that the man

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<sup>6</sup> "American Romance" follows a man who decides to pace in a department store revolving door after a fight with his wife. His peculiar actions gain the attention of a business magnate who offers him money if he beats the endurance record for pacing in a revolving door. The little man succeeds and wins money to bring back to his angry wife. This story is often interpreted as a satire of endurance races that were popular in the twenties. Another example is his well-known tale "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1939), in which the little man escapes his dull life through vivid fantasies in which he imagines himself the hero. See James Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," originally 18 March 1939, reprinted in *Thurber: Writings and Drawings* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 545-550.

thought he heard. Structurally, the work is designed to mock the wife's point of view; the presence of the seal proves the man right. But the man's face—hesitant and fearful, as though he almost hopes he is wrong—destabilizes the joke and lends the work a more ominous tone.

In "Seal in the Bedroom," the woman's face is severe. Her scraggly hair does not read at all as conventionally feminine. The way Thurber draws her neck makes it look as though she has a double chin. The effort to harden her appearance is one of several techniques that Thurber used to caricature the women in the various images. Some of these women, such as the figure in a work captioned "When I Realized that I Once Actually *Loved* You I Go Cold All Over," loom over the men (fig. 2.2). Her sharp features punctuate the space of tension between her and the pudgier, shorter man. In other images, the woman simply looks crazed; in the dark scene captioned "Have You People Got Any .38 Cartridges?," for example, the female stranger at the center has hair that is slightly reminiscent of the classical monstrous figure Medusa (fig. 2.3). Thurber uses her hair to further marginalize her as a deranged woman who has come to a couple's door to ask for bullets.

The woman who appears in the work captioned "Stop Me!" represents the extreme end of this caricature scale (fig. 2.4). Careening on the ice towards a frightened little man, this woman is an untethered display of spectacular female grotesquery: all buttocks, legs, and limbs extending from her core in all directions. Here, Thurber's loose gestural pen strokes amplify the spectacular qualities of this woman. The protrusions that extend from her core act as unstable signifiers that simultaneously evoke arms, tentacles, or even serpents. Thurber's lines also form a set of formal juxtapositions between the staccato rhythms of the man's nervous body and her large looming force.

At times in the broader series, the bodies in Thurber's cartoons seem to be oozing, melting, or shape shifting before our very eyes. Both the man's body and his wife's in "Seal in the Bedroom," for example, seem to melt into the bed. Their arms, pulled inward, are strangely similar to the flippers of the seal above them. Thurber's backgrounds are just as unsettling. Notice, for example, how awkwardly the headboard meets the bed in "Seal in the Bedroom." Many of the works in this series follow the same pattern as these images. As a whole, the series presents tense situations involving men and women in interwar-era America within a highly suggestive pictorial language. The pervasive tone is one of anxiety—caused by women, experienced by men, and elicited more generally within the destabilizing structure of the images themselves. The men are almost always silenced and responding to women.

Current interpretations of Thurber's series have focused primarily on the humorist's biography as a key factor in understanding the unsettling components of these images.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I reposition his cartoons by placing them into the context of a set of larger debates around middle-class gender relations, focusing especially on cultural expectations of middle-class manhood rooted in ideals of so-called "normalcy." As disability scholar Lennard Davis argues, during much of the interwar period, normalcy was defined by middle-class ideals of conformity and accommodation, cool impersonality and analytical distance, and psychological and physical fitness.<sup>8</sup> These ideals of middle-class manhood were supported by a pro-business government and cultivated in a variety of ways: including the flourishing body health culture; the rise of consumer capitalism; and the explosion of vernacular forms of psychology that exploited self-doubt by claiming to provide the very tools that would help readers meet social expectations

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<sup>7</sup> The first section of this chapter looks at these approaches much more closely, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses.

<sup>8</sup> See Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3-19.

of normal behavior and performance.<sup>9</sup> The economic upheaval of Great Depression, and political and social instability that it engendered, presented a challenge to prevailing assumptions about middle-class masculinity.

After analyzing the current scholarship on these works—including studies on their published context, *The New Yorker*—I turn to Thurber’s own writings on the themes of the psyche, normalcy, and civil liberties as a framework for understanding possible motivations for making these cartoons. Thurber’s writings reveal a man who was not only resistant to the ideals of middle-class manhood cultivated in the 1920s, but also to related calls for strength and fortitude in the face of the crisis manifest most prominently in Roosevelt’s New Deal rhetoric. Thurber’s works provide an alternative that gives vivid form to underlying anxieties that many were experiencing as jobs became scarce and the future became uncertain. Yet, critically, they do so in highly gendered fashion at the expense of modern women, who are not only diminished as tired gender stereotypes, but who are often cast as grotesques. In this regard the works diminish women’s recent accomplishments, while also registering anxiety over them. I am interested in how the works operate on multiple levels within these cultural and social contexts, as commentaries about what Thurber’s colleague Dorothy Parker called, in relation to these works, the “startling present.”<sup>10</sup>

## **POSITIONING THURBER: *THE NEW YORKER*, BIOGRAPHY, AND NERVOUSNESS**

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<sup>9</sup> For more on body health culture, see Paula Lupkin, *Manhood Factories: YMCA Architecture and the Making of Modern Architecture* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2010); and Teresa Carbone, ed., *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2011). Lupkin’s study focuses specifically on the explosion of YMCA buildings across the country in the 1910s and 1920s, and how their design contribution the manufacturing of ideals of middle-class manhood.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Parker, quoted in William Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor, Vol. II: 1865-1938* (The Macmillan Company, 1938), 237-38.

Thurber's series of cartoons about men and women from the early 1930s occupies an unusual place in the history of American graphic satire. While they have long been recognized, quite correctly, as satires of male anxiety, most scholars have either written about them in a very generalized way in studies about *The New Yorker* or have interpreted this subject through an exclusively biographical lens.<sup>11</sup> Almost all of this scholarship is outside of art history, within the interdisciplinary field of humor studies, where Thurber is positioned not so much as an artist but more broadly as a humorist who dabbled in a wide variety of formats in his career, including cartoons.<sup>12</sup> Thurber's reputation in these studies is based primarily on his writings and not his cartoons.

The most detailed discussion on the early years of *The New Yorker* is Judith Yaross Lee's 2000 study *Defining New Yorker*, which focuses on the magazine's creation and developments between 1925 and 1930. When the publication's creator Harold Ross launched the magazine in 1925, it was with the goal of providing more sophisticated humorous material to middle-to-upper-class New York inhabitants than he had believed was currently on the market.<sup>13</sup> According to Yaross Lee, Ross seized a niche market at the right moment; he was the first to target dual income, no kids—that affluent, educated audience that is still their staple.<sup>14</sup> Yaross Lee focuses on the mechanical particulars of this endeavor—how *The New Yorker* constructed and

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<sup>11</sup> *The New Yorker* studies include Yagoda, *About Town*, and Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*. Biographical studies include Kinney, *James Thurber: His Life and Times*; Graur, *Remember Laughter*; and John Updike, "Forward to the Perennial Edition," in *Is Sex Necessary? Or Why You Feel the Way You Do*, by James Thurber and E.B. White (New York: Harper Perennial, 1929; reprint 2004), xiii-xxii.

<sup>12</sup> A discussion of the anti-commercial bias in art historical studies on cartooning and graphic satire can be found in Katherine Roeder, "Looking High and Low at Comic Art," *American Art* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 2-9.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Ross created *The New Yorker* as a counterpoint to the two biggest selling magazines on the market, *Life* and *Judge*, which were both public interest periodicals that tended toward fairly simplistic humor—puns and repeated gags—in an attempt at mass appeal. He wanted his work to be both more localized and more specific, as well as more sophisticated. For a period history on Ross, see Dale Kramer, *Ross and The New Yorker* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1951).

<sup>14</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 11.

communicated its distinctive personality, which was founded, she argues, on the basic idea of “humor as urban and urbane.”<sup>15</sup> Yaross Lee contends that the magazine was able to transform “nineteenth-century traditions of character, dialect, and situation into materials appropriate to a mass market of educated, sophisticated consumers” by forging “new links between visual and verbal wit.”<sup>16</sup> Her study focuses on the array of figures involved in this modernizing enterprise, from Ross to the various staffers including Thurber, who began as managing editor in 1927 before switching to a copy editor position and full-time columnist in 1928.

Yaross Lee’s coverage of Thurber’s work, specifically, concentrates on his literary contributions, particularly his literary and news parodies, as well as his “little man” narratives, the latter of which became more prominent right before the Depression. Her discussion of both genres, however, is brief. Of the former, she argues that his parodies—which often sneered at brash commercialism—contributed to the magazine’s self-conscious sophistication.<sup>17</sup> Regarding the latter, Yaross Lee locates the “little man” narrative within a broader trope of the modern “Sufferer” that also fascinated Thurber’s colleague and office mate, writer and columnist E.B. White.<sup>18</sup> Notably, she emphasizes that Thurber’s treatment of the theme of comic victimization was envisioned in more distinctly sexualized terms than White’s works, which often dealt more broadly with challenges within the world to one’s self esteem.<sup>19</sup> Because Thurber’s drawings derive thematically from these stories, this difference is important. Yet Yaross Lee does not

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<sup>15</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> She cites his imitation news clips in “News of the Day” as her prime example. In one such column, from 1927, Thurber described an eleven-year-old girl who cleverly converts her parents’ murders into vaudeville bookings worth sixty thousand dollars. For more details, see Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 293.

<sup>18</sup> White applied the “sufferer” motif to a variety of different narratives and character types. See Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 295.

<sup>19</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 295.

expand on this observation. Rather, she is more interested in what she calls “interpersonal process” of these works—the ways they helped to shape the magazine’s overall comic style.<sup>20</sup>

In Yaross Lee’s study, Thurber is discussed as one of scores of figures who came together to shape the publication in the early years—figures that included such notables as White, Dorothy Parker, Ralph Barton, and Al Freuh. Critical to our analysis of Thurber’s works, this community included both men and women. One of Yaross Lee’s chief contributions to our understanding is that she dispels a common myth that *The New Yorker* was a male-centered endeavor that produced humor designed to appeal only to men. Yaross Lee demonstrates that, to the contrary, the magazine was on the forefront of hiring women, including literary editor Katharine Angell, who was responsible for the majority of every week’s copy; writers like Parker; and a number of female cartoonists who made the challenges of modern womanhood a central concern, including Alice Harvey and Barbara Shermund.<sup>21</sup>

A useful example of the more female-centered cartoons is Shermund’s untitled 1928 image, a nine-panel cartoon strip featuring a slim, attractive, and silent woman with her portly talkative date (fig. 2.7). A regular contributor like Thurber—publishing at a consistent rate throughout the late twenties—Shermund enjoyed the large audience *The New Yorker* offered for her lampoons of modern love and romance, though she never achieved Thurber’s lasting fame for her images in no small part because of a history of gender bias in the scholarship.<sup>22</sup> The joke in her image from 1928 hinges on the portly man’s vanity and self-absorption, expressed through

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<sup>20</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, when Ross published Thurber’s cartoon series about wounded “little men,” in the early thirties, they were seen in relation to a spectrum of social satire on the topic of gender relations.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the absence of scholarship on *New Yorker* artists, particularly female *The New Yorker* artists, see Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 13-14. For the lack of scholarship of female cartoonists more generally, see discussion in Katherine Roeder, “Looking High and Low at Comic Art,” 2-9.

her representation of his voluble gesticulations that shift from scene to scene, along with his old-fashioned expectation that women remain “seen but not heard.” In her own analysis of this work, Yaross Lee notes how the woman’s outward glance signals an awareness of what was a sizable female readership at *The New Yorker* that may have very well identified with the scene.<sup>23</sup>

Because she ends her study in 1930, Yaross Lee does not discuss the striking contrast between this and other female-sympathetic works and Thurber’s somewhat later cartoons series, which includes works that not only reverse the dynamics in Shermund’s cheeky cartoon, but also dramatize the tension through the evocatively distorted forms. Yaross Lee is justifiably concerned with recuperating women’s contributions, and their inclusion not only challenges reductive stereotypes of the magazine but also addresses a problematic gap in the scholarship on comic arts more generally. But in her effort to challenge negative stereotypes of the magazine, she also overlooks broader tensions among these images. The conceptual and chronological parameters of her study also exclude a broader consideration of the economic and social turbulence that would mark much of the interwar period.

Journalism studies scholar Ben Yagoda’s 2000 history of the magazine, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, fills in some of these contextual gaps. Covering a much longer range of time, Yagoda is particularly fascinated by the factors that made the publication a sustained success from its beginnings to its present iteration as a source for in-depth reporting, commentaries, and news journalism. As one might expect from such an endeavor, Yagoda gives considerable attention to the business side of the magazine. During the Depression, when Thurber’s cartoon series appeared, the magazine was able to stay afloat through advertising

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<sup>23</sup> Yaross Lee also looks at the advertising patterns in *The New Yorker* to flesh out this claim. Ross frequently featured products like make-up and perfume aimed at women. See Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 220-21.



sales; they were one of the top three magazines on this statistic in that decade, in fact. Their readership also spread beyond the confines of Manhattan during the Depression. In 1930, about 30 percent of the subscribers were from outside of the state; by 1932, a full 50 percent were outside the area. Yagoda argues that within the magazine, New York City operated not so much as a place as an *idea*—a “panoply of desired qualities: sophisticated, wealthy, new.” The magazine grew in its first years, he argues, on the “twenties spirit of ascension.”<sup>24</sup>

Yagoda claims the magazine strongly resisted “coming down to earth” after the stock market crash marked the beginning of the Depression—with a few exceptions, including Thurber’s works. He describes Thurber’s images as cartoons about men who were “ineffectual and quietly resentful in the face of the forces ruling his life.” He also claims, suggestively, that Thurber’s cartoons “imploded” conventions, bringing the magazine “to a higher level of truth.” Yagoda’s language here is evocative but frustratingly vague. He does not expand on either of these descriptions, nor does he address the sexual politics that form the thematic thread through the cartoon series. Both Yagoda’s and Yaross Lee’s studies on *The New Yorker* only skim the surface of analysis of Thurber’s works.

In biographical studies of the artist, which constitute the most in depth examination of his works, the unsettling aspects of Thurber’s cartoon that are merely hinted at in Yagoda’s discussion take far greater precedence. Thurber’s works are repeatedly positioned as distinctly unsettling. Harrison Kinney’s 1995 biography *James Thurber: His Life and Times* remains by far the most in-depth of these studies, documenting each episode of his life in painstaking detail.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, 59, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Kinney, *James Thurber: His Life and Times*; Graur, *Remember Laughter*. The biographical deals that follow come from these texts.

His biography is also the only study to attempt to account for almost every work in the humorist's prodigious body of work.

For Kinney and the other biographers contributing to the field, clues to understanding Thurber's series begin with a much earlier set of experiences than those at *The New Yorker*. Thurber, who was born in 1894 as the middle of three boys to middle-class parents, grew up and spent much of his early career in Columbus, Ohio, before moving to New York in 1926. In 1902, when he was seven years old, he lost his eye in an accident with his older brother involving a bow and arrow.<sup>26</sup> For the rest of his life he wore a glass prosthetic eye and thick glasses, and as he aged, his eyesight diminished until the point of blindness in his later years, after 1940.

Thurber is characterized as an outsider figure in the biographic studies of the humorist: somewhat socially marginalized by his disability, and self-conscious during his childhood and early adulthood. Thurber began to become interested in writing, Kinney argues, at least in part as a form of escape from the challenges of daily life.<sup>27</sup> Thurber's writing interests developed in college at Ohio State University (1914-18), where he was introduced to many of the major writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, and where he worked as an editor and writer for the campus paper *The Lantern* and the campus humor magazine *Sun-Dial*.<sup>28</sup> At these newspapers, he began to find his niche, both professionally and socially. Often playing the fool at parties, Kinney writes, he was able to turn his difference into an asset for making friends.

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<sup>26</sup> James and his brother were playing a game of William Tell. See Kinney, *James Thurber*, 35-37, for more details about this terrible accident. According to Kinney, poor initial medical treatment contributed to eyesight problems in his remaining eye.

<sup>27</sup> See Kinney, *James Thurber*, 97-119.

<sup>28</sup> Thurber began working for both of these publications in 1917. Notably, his columns included "he/she" jokes structured to poke fun at women, who in the jokes were often stereotyped as dimwits.

Later on at *The New Yorker*, he would be known for his affable and warm personality that he had developed in his college years.<sup>29</sup>

Thurber never finished college due to truancy problems. He had a particularly difficult time with military drill classes that were required of all male students at the public university.<sup>30</sup> Towards the end of WWI in late 1918—after being rejected for the draft—he volunteered with the U.S. State Department to work as a code operator in France.<sup>31</sup> He returned to Columbus, Ohio, in 1920, where he spent the next five years working in various positions, including a brief stint as a columnist at *The Columbus Dispatch*. In 1921, he met his first wife, Althea, who he married in 1922. In 1925, the two traveled to Paris with the hopes that Thurber could establish a freelance career, to no avail. After a year of working as a reporter for the Riviera edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, he left with Althea to New York, where he eventually found employment at *The New Yorker* in 1927.<sup>32</sup>

This early period, Kinney and other biographers emphasize, was marked by frustration and failures. He had several unfinished projects in these years that never fully materialized.<sup>33</sup> By

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<sup>29</sup> In one interview with biographer Neil Graur, cartoonist Al Hirshfield recalls Thurber using his sightlessness as a frequent punch line for jokes. “He had a wonderful sense of humor about his sightlessness...He had a glass eye...and he used to change it at parties,” Hirshfield wrote. “...at two o’clock in the morning, he’d put one in, and it would be a little American flag! It was a shocker, you know. You’d look at him and there’s little American flag flying there in his eye.” Graur, *Remember Laughter*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Kinney writes, suggestively, that Thurber knew that “his physical disability would disqualify him from military service, and he resented the reading time that the drilling exercises cost him.” See Kinney, *James Thurber*, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Letters from this period show he saw no serious action. Rather, he found this time in France—the first time living outside the U.S. invigorating. This trip almost certainly played a role in his decision to return to Paris in the mid-1920s. See his letters written in 1919, republished in *The Thurber Letters: The Wit, Wisdom, and Surprising Life of James Thurber* ed. Harrison Kinney (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 26-40.

<sup>32</sup> He also worked briefly, in 1926, as a feature reporter at the *New York World*.

<sup>33</sup> The most notable of these projects was an unfinished book length parody of four best sellers—*Microbe Hunters*, *Nize Baby*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *Why We Behave like Human Beings*—that he was going to call “Why We Behave like Microbe Hunters.” See Kinney, *James Thurber*, 306-7, for more on

the time he was established at *The New Yorker*, his marriage was also on the rocks. At the time that he produced his cartoon series in the early thirties, he was established professionally, but was in an open marriage that would end in divorce in 1935.<sup>34</sup> All of the biographies use these life experiences to build the case for reading his cartoon series in autobiographical terms.

In many of these biographical studies, notably, Thurber is singled out as a man who had particularly difficult trouble navigating these various life challenges. Kinney's biography characterizes him as a man prone to fits of nervousness—who made infrequent trips to the sanitarium and who visited a psychotherapist—whose own personality is expressed in the “funny but fatalistic” tone of his writings.<sup>35</sup> In literary scholar Neil Graur's 1994 biography *Remember Laughter: A Life of James Thurber*, the biographer also casts Thurber as a man with psychological problems including anxiety and nervousness, arguing that his works exhibit a “private misanthropy.”<sup>36</sup> Literary critic John Updike makes this argument in especially dramatic terms in his analysis:

Thurber's inner life, hyperactive since his boyhood, when his natural frailty was intensified by his ophthalmological impairment, could indeed achieve astounding proportions; the convenient diagnosis “nervous breakdown” entered his medical history a number of times, and there were, as he aged, increasingly frequent explosions of wild and rageful drunken behavior.<sup>37</sup>

Citing an anecdote in which Thurber apparently likened Althea to the “Statue of Liberty,” he suggests that his wife inspired “the menacing female figure in so many of his drawings.”<sup>38</sup> Even *The New Yorker* studies by Yaross Lee and Yagoda get into the act of psychobiography in their

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this project. In a letter dated from 1922, he also spoke of writing a novel about the futility of modern man. This letter, to his friend Elliott Nugent, is quoted in Kinney, *James Thurber*, 265.

<sup>34</sup> For the timeline of Thurber and Althea's rocky relationship, see Kinney, *James Thurber*, 1083-85.

<sup>35</sup> Kinney, *James Thurber: His Life and Times*, xiv.

<sup>36</sup> Graur, *Remember Laughter*, xv.

<sup>37</sup> John Updike, Forward in *Is Sex Necessary?*, xvi.

<sup>38</sup> Updike, Forward in *Is Sex Necessary?*, xv.

discussions of Thurber. Yaross Lee notes Thurber's "little man" works emerged in a "transitional period" in his life in which he was "moving toward divorce."<sup>39</sup> Yagoda writes that much of Thurber's work was autobiographically driven: "self-mockery, self-aggrandizement, and self-pity."<sup>40</sup> In all of these readings, Thurber's unsettling images become intertwined with the characterization of the man himself.

Thurber's troubled background is an important component for understanding his cartoons. If nothing else, the details that Kinney and others explore provide us with a glimpse into the possible motivations for Thurber's fascination with male anxiety as a sustained theme. But the conclusions that these scholars draw from his background are tenuous at best. These readings hinge on a set of assumptions about Thurber that privilege certain facts while omitting others. Most notably within this framework, Thurber's works have remained isolated from their broader context. The biographical approach has also had the effect of dislodging his works from their cultural context as published images that circulated widely. A closer analysis of some of the key omissions allows for a different kind of reading of the images to emerge—one that does not dismiss Thurber's background, but instead treats it as the basis for social commentary on middle-class manhood in the period.

For one, these works were *not* private expressions as these biographical interpretations suggest. To the contrary, they were specifically, and deliberately, made for public discourse. The thought put into this series for *The New Yorker* was considerable. Thurber, who had already been employed as a writer and columnist for the comic weekly, had tried and failed at least twice to have his works published in the magazine before they actually appeared. Only after he gained popular attention for drawings published in a book co-written with E.B. White, *Is Sex*

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<sup>39</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 296.

<sup>40</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, 91.

*Necessary?* (1929), did his boss Harold Ross take his work seriously and publish the series.<sup>41</sup>

Once in the magazine, moreover, they entered into an intertextual relationship with other images about gender relations such as the cartoon on dating by Shermund (see fig. 2.7).<sup>42</sup> As someone involved in the magazine since 1927, Thurber was well familiar with this larger body of work.

Here, it is critical to note that Thurber's interactions with women were hardly limited to his personal relationship with Althea, which figures so centrally in biographical interpretations. As Yaross Lee's study of *The New Yorker* establishes, the magazine hired a number of women to major positions. As a managing editor and later copy editor and columnist at *The New Yorker*, Thurber would have interacted with women at the office on a daily basis—copy editing their work, interacting with them in meetings, and making requests to the female typists.<sup>43</sup>

This particular feature of the magazine is exemplary of broader changes afoot in the early twentieth century related to women in society more generally. Outside of the office environment, Thurber would have come into contact with women in almost all facets of public life. The growth of corporate capitalism had contributed to these shifts as new jobs were created to support growing business and the development of mass consumerism. In her study on this period, art historian Ellen Wiley Todd writes that the number of women working as stenographers, salespeople, and typists grew from 171,000 to 2 million between 1890 and 1920. By 1930, she

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<sup>41</sup> Thurber was originally encouraged by his office mate White to submit his drawings. Thurber tried on several occasions in the late 1920s. This is documented in Graur, *Remembering Laughter*, 43-45.

<sup>42</sup> Shermund's coy take on dating is fairly typical in tone of the cartoons on gender relationships in the period. While Shermund was among the most frequent contributors of such content, she was far from the only woman at the magazine to explore these themes. Dorothy Parker, in her capacity as a fiction writer, contributed many short stories poking fun at the expectations of monogamy and accommodation expected of women.

<sup>43</sup> In his memoir about his time at *The New Yorker* Thurber hints at these complex sexual politics, describing Ross as a man who had particular difficulty working with women in the office environment, despite his repeated decision to hire them. See James Thurber, *The Years with Ross* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2000).

notes, one in every five women in the country had a clerical job; and in New York City, the ratio was one in three.<sup>44</sup> In the early 1930s, when Thurber was producing his works, he was navigating an entirely new public environment than previous generations of middle-class men—one where women were active participants in public life as employees, consumers, and voting citizens.

Regardless of how striking Thurber’s biography might seem, when it comes to analyzing Thurber’s images, it is also important to recognize that bouts with nervousness and anxiety were hardly unique. Thurber had a number of friends within his professional circle at *The New Yorker*, for example, who also suffered from psychological problems, including contributing artist Ralph Barton, who committed suicide in 1931, as well as his employer Ross, who was also known to suffer from frequent nervous breakdowns.<sup>45</sup> In their study on the phenomena of “nervous breakdowns” in the United States, cultural historians Megan Barke, Rebecca Fribuss, and Peter N. Stearns reveal that the interwar period marked the peak of problems with what was often called “cracking up.”<sup>46</sup> By 1929, anxiety disorders had become so common that the Ninth International Congress of Psychology had declared the “struggle for ‘nerves’” as one of the “major conflicts of the day.”<sup>47</sup>

Barke and her colleagues cite several factors in their analysis that are worth noting in relation to Thurber’s depictions of male anxiety. First, the entire phenomenon of “nervousness” was a modern one. Nervousness emerged in the late nineteenth century alongside the growth of industrial capitalism as a condition loosely tied to fatigue and loss of concentration and

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<sup>44</sup> Ellen Wiley Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xxvi. The increasing presence of women, it is important to note, was mostly confined to lower-level positions.

<sup>45</sup> On Barton’s suicide, see “Ralph Barton Ends His Life with Pistol,” *New York Times* (21 May 1931), 1; and Wendy Wick Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature in America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 157. For repeated discussions of Ross’s nervousness, see Thurber, *My Life with Ross*.

<sup>46</sup> Megan Barke, Peter N. Stearns, and Rebecca Fribush, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 3 (2000), 565–84.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Rae, “Says Women Rule Minds of Husbands,” *New York Times* (5 September 1929), 22.

efficiency. “A growing adherence to the idea of the body as a machine helped pave the way,” writes Barke and her colleagues, “as it replaced more fluid (humoral) traditional imagery.”<sup>48</sup>

Barke and her colleagues also emphasize that the nervous breakdown was never delimited to a single set of symptoms, but rather embraced an array of symptoms linked to work and idleness. The growing emphasis in the 1920s on efficiency further heightened attention, they note, “to the body as a machine and to the economic costs of disruption.”<sup>49</sup>

Nervous breakdowns, whether discussed in professional or in popular culture, embraced the tension around the impact of such work within modern capitalism. Concerns about nervousness fueled a veritable industry of psychologically themed material—from professional journals, to popular novels, to vernacular forms of psychology such as radio programs, self-help books, and marriage manuals—all of which were designed to address and defeat the apparent crisis.<sup>50</sup> Vernacular forms of psychology devoted to this cause ended up on best sellers lists. According to Thurber’s colleague E.B. White, the public was obsessed with self-improvement, “The Freudian concepts were accepted quite generally...Doctors, psychiatrists and other students of misbehavior were pursuing sex to the last ditch, and the human animal seemed absorbed in self-analysis.”<sup>51</sup> Some experts attacked under-work because they believed that it allowed people to wallow in their own worries instead of spending their time more usefully. Ellen Glasgow’s 1925 novel *Barren Ground*, for example, traced the career of Dorrina Oakly, who suffered from

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<sup>48</sup> Barke et al, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” 566.

<sup>49</sup> Barke et al, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” 569.

<sup>50</sup> For more on vernacular psychology, see Allison Miller, “Am I Normal? American Vernacular Psychology and the Tomboy Body, 1900-1940,” *Representations* 122, no. 1 (2013), 23–50. For more on psychology advice on radio programming, see Peter J. Behrens, “Psychology Takes to the Airways: American Radio Psychology between the Wars, 1926-1939,” *The American Sociologist* 40, no. 3 (September 2009), 214-27.

<sup>51</sup> E.B. White, “Introduction,” in *Is Sex Necessary?*, 4.



anxiety but was cured by a regimen of work.<sup>52</sup> But others saw it differently. “What is our spectacular civilization if, in the end, our nervous systems cannot stand up under its pressures?” wondered psychologist Albert Adams.<sup>53</sup> The nervous breakdown was thought to signal an apparent discordance between personal expectations and the realities of modern life.

Barke and her colleagues also note that, within these larger debates, gender played a complex role. The concerns around work were often tied to men, thought to be the breadwinners. Nervousness was a condition that raised questions about their masculinity. Nervousness also raised concerns about vulnerability to stress. Vaguely Freudian notions of “subconscious repression” were often invoked in analysis of these ideas, but as Barke and her colleagues note, this was rarely pushed too far because of the period’s preference for self-control.<sup>54</sup> The 1920s were a period of changing gender dynamics. As Barke and her colleagues note, these changes came with new emotional and physical standards as well. Expectations to accommodate to change and contain outward expressions of emotions were also a factor.<sup>55</sup>

Thurber’s cartoons about masculine anxiety begin to take a different shape when we consider them in relation to this broader set of contexts more closely tied to larger concerns around gender and social expectations than anything specific to Thurber’s life. In the next section, I will expand on my analysis of the historiography, focusing especially on Thurber’s correspondences and contributions as a writer, to further develop a different reading of his cartoons.

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<sup>52</sup> This is discussed in Barke et al, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” 570.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Barke et al, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” 570.

<sup>54</sup> Barke et al, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” 573.

<sup>55</sup> Barke et al, “Nervous Breakdown in 20th-Century American Culture,” 575. See also T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Lears identifies forms of psychic and physical repression inherited from Protestant forms of internalization that persisted into the modernizing era.

## THURBER AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Thurber did not only engage with the thriving discourse of mental health from the perspective of a patient. He treated the fields of psychology and psychiatry as rich and evocative tools for social and political criticism. Over and over in his career, the humorist turned the language of psychoanalysis and the related themes of normalcy, manhood, anxiety, and the unconscious as points of critical analysis in his written work. A closer look at Thurber's publications on this subject, along with related private correspondences, provides a framework for us to begin to understand Thurber's own views about the issues of gender, manhood, and social expectations at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the Depression.

First, generally speaking, Thurber was drawn to psychoanalytic theory as both a mode of expressing modern experiences and as a framework for understanding social relations. While politically liberal (and strongly sympathetic to Roosevelt's New Deal program), he was skeptical of political ideologies during the interwar period that seemed to police the boundaries of human experience. In a letter written to his friend Malcolm Cowley in 1934, Thurber spoke of concerns about the desire within society to "subject the individual to the political body, to the economic structure, to put the artist in a uniform so like the uniform of the subway conductor that nobody would be able to tell the difference."<sup>56</sup> Thurber believed that Freudian psychology—with its emphasis on the unconscious, the irrational, and one's desires and deepest anxieties—offered a meaningful alternative, by attending to the "plain personal intimate and private disturbances," as he put it, that were often omitted within these regulatory discourses.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> James Thurber to Malcolm Cowley, nd 1934, in *The Thurber Letters*, 176.

<sup>57</sup> Thurber to Malcolm Cowley, nd 1934, in *The Thurber Letters*, 176.

Notably, this concern about the socializing process of the individual body crossed a political spectrum in Thurber's writings. In the 1934 letter, his attack was directed specifically at proletarian writers, who as frequent critics of *The New Yorker* had treated Thurber's works as escapist. Thurber was bothered by this basic conceit. To him, the Marxist perspective overlooked the most basic of human experience, which for him, notably, was rooted in sexual relationships between men and women—founded on desire, fantasy, primal needs, fear and anxiety, and physical attraction.<sup>58</sup>

Much earlier in his career, in a letter written in 1922, he confronted the more corporate construction of the modern citizen, envisioned in President Warren Harding's campaign promise of a "return to normalcy" from 1920. For Harding, "normalcy" centered at least in part on pro-business initiatives that facilitated the growth of larger corporations, spurring a period of rapid economic growth. Regarding the business ethos that would come to characterize the decade before the Depression, Thurber wrote:

Out of living here I get only an increasing conviction that America has no cultural or intellectual or even intelligent future. The signs of it are everywhere. It is all stocks and bonds, automobiles, real estate, business deals, pettiness and other junk, with one person out of 10,000 who seems inspired by any outside light at all.<sup>59</sup>

In his 1934 letter to Cowley, Thurber explained that he was drawn to the fact that Freudian theories were "not based on intellectual opinion, not on ideology, not on dialectics, not on class feeling." He saw the Freudian construction of the self as a means to challenge what he viewed as efforts from all fronts to colonize the individual in the service of ideology.

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<sup>58</sup> In his 1934 letter, Thurber recounts a remarkable fight between the humorist and Communist writer Mike Gold about this theme. Thurber claims that he confronted Gold on his principles and asked him if Communism was able to make him happy in his marriage. "I asked him if he was married and he said yes. I asked him if he was happy and he dodged it," Thurber writes. Thurber to Malcolm Cowley, nd 1934, in *The Thurber Letters*, 175.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Elliott Nugent from November 1922. Quoted in Kinney, *James Thurber*, 265.

Within his vision of psychoanalytical theory, the unconscious reigned. Thurber treated it not as a repository of shame, but as a space of authentic experience. Thurber disliked the modern preference for rationality and efficiency that had been core ideals of American society since he was a child, and that would emerge within New Deal ideology as part of the recovery efforts. Thurber's satirical commentary on advice manuals, titled *Let Your Mind Alone* (1935), shows his resistance to notions of political citizenship based on fortitude and rationality. In that text, Thurber wrote, "The undisciplined mind runs far less chance of having its purposes thwarted, its plans distorted, its whole scheme and system wrenched out of line."<sup>60</sup> Attacking the various promises of transcendence conveyed in Communism, New Deal ideology, and self-help books, he went so far as to claim the undisciplined mind a necessary component for survival during the Depression, "far better adapted to the confused world in which we live today than the streamlined mind. This is, I am afraid, no place for the streamlined mind."<sup>61</sup>

But Thurber was also skeptical of the obsession with normalcy that was often central to the field of psychology, particularly the forms of vernacular psychology that had emerged in response to growing concerns around nervous breakdowns. In his 1930 essay "Freud: Or the Future of Psychoanalysis," he mocked the need to straightjacket the "typical American male—worried, twitching, and expecting to have a nervous breakdown at any moment."<sup>62</sup> Thurber asked a fundamental question: on what terms does a doctor determine the mentally healthy from the unstable in the first place? This concern hinged on questioning the very notion of "normalcy" itself:

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<sup>60</sup> James Thurber, *Let Your Mind Alone* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1935), 18.

<sup>61</sup> Thurber, *Let Your Mind Alone*, 18. This work included chapters poking fun of a range of perspectives.

<sup>62</sup> James Thurber, "Freud: Or the Future of Psychoanalysis," in *Whither, Whither, or After Sex, What?*, ed. Walter S. Hankel (The Macaulay Company, 1930), 114.

First of all, there is the tricky question of what is going to be ‘normal’ in a world of constantly shifting values. It is hard enough to determine what is ‘normal’ now. Many psychologists not only already disagree on what is normal, but they also disagree on the definition of the word, and those that do agree describe what they mean in such involved terminology that the definitions usually make the same sense when read backwards as they do when read forwards.<sup>63</sup>

In this and his later text, *Let Your Mind Alone*, Thurber not only eschewed the basic principles of normalcy, but encouraged others to reject its premise as well.

The primary goal of *Let Your Mind Alone* was to mock many of the best-selling texts that made claims to be able to cure the pervasive sense of anxiety that had been so well documented in the period. “Freud: Or the Future of Psychoanalysis” was an essay that deconstructed the very basis of psychiatry itself. These works both demonstrate a far more complex understanding of the social expectations of modern manhood than are described in the biographical approaches to his cartoons. An even more important text for our understanding of his cartoon series is his 1929 parody book *Is Sex Necessary?*, co-written with his colleague White. As already noted, this work represents the first major publication to feature his drawings. The work also reveals Thurber’s views on the psychological discourse on sexual relationships specifically; the book is designed as a parody of best-selling marriage manuals.

I have already noted the immense popularity of vernacular psychology in the period in the form of self-help books, marriage texts, and even radio programming. To understand the parody nature of *Is Sex Necessary?*, it is important to consider the cultural role of popular forms of vernacular psychology as well. In the years before and during the Depression, men and women turned to them as key resources for understanding what was meant by “normal” in a period where gender and class relationships were in transition. Vernacular forms of psychology often drew from the language of psychoanalysis, which had slowly gained popularity in the

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<sup>63</sup> Thurber, “Freud: Or the Future of Psychoanalysis,” 118.

1920s, several years after Freud's visit to speak at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1909.<sup>64</sup> But little about these popular texts was rooted in Freud's original theories. At its core, Freudian psychoanalysis in the U.S. was diagnostic and therapeutic. One goal of psychotherapy was self-discovery through open-ended sessions designed to help access repressed memories, childhood trauma, or irrational fantasies and anxieties. One of the reasons Thurber himself was drawn to psychoanalysis was because it honored what he called "private disturbances" as a valid component of the human subjectivity.<sup>65</sup>

Vernacular forms of psychology, by contrast, adapted the concept of psychoanalysis towards a more prescriptive model. Walter Pitkin's 1929 book *The Psychology of Happiness*, which claimed that six or seven of every ten people could be happy given the proper guidance, was fairly typical of the tone of such works.<sup>66</sup> Driven by vague yet seductive promises, these works tended toward a language that Warren Susman has called the "strange combination of religion and psychology."<sup>67</sup> As a whole, these works favored a more positivist construction of the subject than in Freudian psychoanalysis; that is, they tended to treat the human mind as a perfectible object. In this respect, vernacular psychology bore similarities to the principles of scientific management discussed in Chapter One. The mind, like the body, could be *willed* with due diligence into mental health within this conceit.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of the popularization of Freud in the U.S. in the 1910s, see F.H. Matthews, "The Americanization of Sigmund Freud: Adaptations of Psychoanalysis before 1917," *Journal of American Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 1967), 39-62.

<sup>65</sup> For more on psychoanalysis as a form of therapy see Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co, 1995), 140-59; and Anthony Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>66</sup> Walter Pitkin, *The Psychology of Happiness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1929).

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Miller, "Am I Normal?," 30.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, "Am I Normal?," 30.

The methodology of these works came out of the emergent field of behavioral psychology, which tended to place emphasis on how outward actions could shape personality over time. The mental hygiene movement conceived by American health expert Clifford Beers also influenced this literature. Mental hygiene adapted—and to a certain extent, rationalized—the Freudian concept of the unconscious to conceptualize a part of the psyche that was “unclean” and in need of regular sanitization through good habits and activities.<sup>69</sup>

*Is Sex Necessary?* took on of these texts, distorting their features to challenge their underlying premise. More specifically, the work was a parody of the profusion of marriage manuals that had developed to help couples navigate modern romance. The bestselling work *The Doctor Looks at Marriage and Medicine* (1928) by Joseph Collins is an especially striking example of this form of literature. In their introduction, Thurber and White cite Collins as an inspiration. Like many of his colleagues in the period, Collins was a believer in companionate marriages. The general consensus was that social advancement of the nation in post-suffrage America required a constant adjustment of individual behaviors towards mutual accommodation. Or as Collins argued, “Selfishness is the great wrecker of matrimony, self-control the great wielder.”<sup>70</sup>

Collins’s manual reveals a larger social agenda that was part and parcel of much of vernacular psychology. According to him, “our biological duty is one: to reproduce our kind” and “have as many children as [married couples] can bring up sanely, healthily, and

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<sup>69</sup> For more on mental hygiene, see Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co, 1995), 151-58.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Collins, *The Doctor Looks at Marriage and Medicine* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc., 1928), 5.

prosperously.”<sup>71</sup> Marital success was positioned as a social project for the greater good of modern American society, which itself was founded on the economic principles of corporate capitalism. Collins created his book as a guide for self-control, and thus for marital success. This duty, he argued, required mental stability for both participants, which according to him was a matter of “eliminating whatever emotional attitudes tend to hinder the search for truth.”<sup>72</sup>

It is important to note that “mental health” itself had an underlying moralistic component within this conceit. As historian Allison Miller notes in her study on the subject, within this flourishing field of vernacular psychology, the body became a venue for cultural debates around the relationships between duty and pleasure—the “pleasure of sexuality and the duty of reproduction, the pleasure of reproduction and the duty of sexuality.”<sup>73</sup> It is also worth noting that Collins’ language constitutes a form of emotional streamlining that Thurber would later ridicule in *Let Your Mind Alone*. Collins treated emotions—and what Thurber called “private disturbances”—as inhibitors to a smooth functioning, efficient individual.<sup>74</sup>

Thurber and White were skeptical of this basic precept. To both of them, the very notion of “eliminating emotional attitudes” was akin to a denial of a part of the modern self. As White would later note, the two believed that vernacular psychology had “got sex down and were breaking its arm.”<sup>75</sup> Thurber and White set up their book in a nearly parallel structure to such manuals to draw out this contrast. Within this framework they presented an alternative to Collins’s framework that turned his measures of success upside down. Instead of offering

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<sup>71</sup> R.L. Ruffus, “Dr. Collins Writes of Marriage and the Doctors,” *New York Times* (11 November 1928), 63.

<sup>72</sup> Ruffus, “Dr. Collins Writes of Marriage and the Doctors,” 63.

<sup>73</sup> Miller, “Am I Normal?,” 30.

<sup>74</sup> Thurber to Malcolm Cowley, nd 1934, in *The Thurber Letters*, 176.

<sup>75</sup> E.B. White, “Introduction,” in *Is Sex Necessary*, 4.



solutions to modern day romance, they suggested the conditions of modern life made it so hopeless for men that they might as well give up.

The pair was especially skeptical of the tendency within the vernacular literature to reduce modern marriage to a set of straightforward practices easily followed to great success. “Marriage, as an instrument, is a well-nigh perfect thing,” they wrote cheekily. “The trouble is that it cannot be successfully applied to the present-day emotional relationships of men and women.”<sup>76</sup> “Unless more stress is laid, and pretty quickly, too, upon the complexity of the male, and the importance of what he is thinking about and what he intends to do, or at least what he would like to do, we are never going to arrive at a norm,” they argued.<sup>77</sup>

Notably, Thurber and White laid out their own more anxious vision of subjectivity along highly gendered terms. Women were cast as foils throughout, causing perpetual confusion for men, often driving them mad. The two drew from Freudian constructions of male anxiety, which rooted neurosis in sexual relationships, to present their vision of modern relationships. In this respect the work was in direct conflict with companionate models of marital relationships, which conceived of gender relationships in accommodating terms, but at the cost of a form of emotional cauterization.

This aspect of the work is especially striking in one of the most misogynistic chapters, called “Claustrophobia, or What Every Young Wife Should Know,” penned by Thurber. This section of the book operates as a treatise on the concept of entrapment, conveyed in vivid terms. Thurber crafted an image of modern relationships as spaces where men experience “dread of being in an enclosed space, of living under conditions which would interfere with a speedy

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<sup>76</sup> Thurber and White, *Is Sex Necessary*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Thurber and White, *Is Sex Necessary*, 22.

escape into the open.”<sup>78</sup> Of modern men, Thurber wrote, in the official language of a “doctor”:  
“There is nothing sadder than the spectacle of a once strong, firm-minded man no longer master of his neuro-vegetative reflexes, to say nothing of a hitherto well-integrated fellow in the throws of Fragmentation.”<sup>79</sup>”

In *Is Sex Necessary?*, marriage became a sharp metaphor for a “lack of freedom” that Thurber claimed modern men experienced in the age of consumer capitalism. Thurber and White chide men for their idleness and perpetual inability to make decisions. Men are confounded nervous creatures who seem completely lost in the modern landscape. This articulation of modern manhood linked *Is Sex Necessary?* to a broader literary discourse from the period, exemplified most fully by Sinclair Lewis’s popular novel *Babbitt* (1922), that used marriage satirically as a metaphor for entrapment. As with Lewis’s novel, discussed in more detail later on in this chapter, women emerge as emblems of the responsibilities of modern life.

Notably, the pair used images by Thurber to enhance this concept in suggestive ways. Throughout, Thurber depicted men in various states of angst, from crawling on the floor in one striking illustration to hiding furtively behind a chair in another (figs. 2.8 and 2.9). Thurber articulated these illustrations in a schematic way, using body distortions and scale to enhance each respective figure’s anxiety. In the work with the figure on the floor, for example, the elongated arms stand in for the man’s agony, as his wife watches him from her chair with a look of impatience. The other image shows the man *in* the chair, which now seems gigantic. Thurber also included works that were supposed to be actual “automatic drawings” from “real” patients

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<sup>78</sup> Thurber, *Is Sex Necessary?*, 133.

<sup>79</sup> Thurber, *Is Sex Necessary?*, 133.

(see fig. 2.10). In these works, he pushed his distortions even further to create inchoate forms that seem to emerge from dreams.<sup>80</sup>

Psychology and psychoanalysis played complex and ambivalent roles in Thurber's writings. He was suspicious of anyone who tried to "streamline" the mind, and mocked American adaptations of Freudian psychoanalysis for the purposes of prescription. Yet Thurber was drawn to the theories of psychoanalysis because to him they addressed and honored an aspect of human experience smoothed over or displaced within political ideologies that celebrated accommodation, efficiency, and psychological and physical fitness as modern ideals. Psychology was a means for him to tap into an alternative formation of society than was encouraged by government, society, and vernacular texts such as Collins' bestselling work *The Doctor Looks at Marriage and Medicine*. He embraced the Freudian constructions of subjectivity—and especially Freud's theories on masculine anxiety and the unconscious—as a form of resistance against the repressive socialization of the middle-class manhood. It was this rejection of positivist ideologies, and their attendant policing of human experience, I argue, that were also central to the cartoon series in *The New Yorker* on men and women.

### **THE CARTOON SERIES: RESISTING THE "STREAMLINED" MIND**

Thurber's cartoons series in *The New Yorker* can be seen, at least to a certain extent, as an augmentation of his work on *Is Sex Necessary?* But in his cartoon series, he adapted the themes of male anxiety and female encroachment to a suggestive visual narrative. This process shed the obvious links to the cultural discourse on mental health so lampooned in the earlier book for a

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<sup>80</sup> Although Thurber never mentioned surrealism in any of his writings, these works have an added comic dimension when considered against the use of automatism in the surrealist art. The works may have been a send up of their work as well.

seemingly more direct, more personal framework. These later works did not flow from his unconscious, as some biographers have suggested. Rather, they were designed to unsettle his viewers, and through this process break down the boundaries between individual experience and the social ideals based in efficiency, self-control, and containment that had been promulgated by the government, business, and cultural forms of production like vernacular forms of psychology. Thurber's cartoons were designed to challenge the socializing process that valued what he had called a "streamlined" mind. Thurber used several techniques to evoke the sense of disorder and confusion in the viewer, breaking down the boundaries of logic, rationality, and accommodation promulgated by mainstream psychology.

Beginning with the narrative structure itself, Thurber constructed his series as a collection of single-panel images with one line of text set up to leave the audience in suspense. This approach is unlike any technique he had worked in before. Thurber's own writings suggest that this anticipatory structure was important to him. In his 1959 memoir *The Years with Ross* about his time at *The New Yorker*, Thurber compares the publishing process to theater: "You're not going to know for sure whether something is good until the readers or the audience see it in print or on stage."<sup>81</sup> Thurber thought of his cartoons in dramatic narrative terms. A letter from 1930 addressed to a friend reveals that for this set of works, specifically, Thurber explicitly wanted to "alarm" his viewers; the suspenseful structure was something like a cliffhanger at the end of a play's first act.<sup>82</sup>

In her description of the works, Thurber's colleague Dorothy Parker argued that Thurber "works solely in culminations...he gives you a glimpse of the startling present, and lets you go

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<sup>81</sup> James Thurber, *The Years with Ross*, orig. 1959 (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 52.

<sup>82</sup> Thurber, Letter to Minette Fritts, January or February 1930, in James Thurber, *The Thurber Letters*, 133.

construct the astounding past.”<sup>83</sup> The combination of elements in each image begs much larger questions: about the personalities we see, about the choices that got them into their predicaments, about how they will escape their situations. But in many drawings in the series, the works also evoke larger symbolic questions about the boundaries of safety and danger, intimacy and violence, and logic and irrationality that speak to the turmoil of the early years of the Depression, when both unemployment and homelessness were high. As Parker highlights, the works are designed to challenge the viewer’s understanding of the world around them. In her mind, this part of the works gave them a critical edge. “And if somewhere in the process you part with a certain amount of sanity,” she wrote about the series, “doubtless you are better off without it.”<sup>84</sup>

The work captioned “Have You People Got Any .38 Cartridges?” embodies this destabilizing quality (see fig. 2.3). In this work, it is particularly easy for viewers to identify with the little man’s downturned expression because the very notion of this scenario seems strange. Thurber provides clues to suggest that the encounter is occurring at night: the man wears a blouse and pants suggestive of pajamas; it differs from the usual suit attire that men wear in most of the other images. This is one of the few images to include a more sympathetic female, presumably the man’s wife, standing behind the man and staring blankly at the scene before both of them: a slightly larger woman at their 10F apartment doorway with a gun pointed at both of them. Word and image work together to disrupt familiar patterns of narrative structure in this work. Without the request for cartridges indicated in the caption, the woman at the door might have registered more one-dimensionally—as someone who has come to threaten them. But instead, her body operates in a liminal narrative space, between that of violence (to self or others,

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<sup>83</sup> Parker, quoted in Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor, Vol. II*, 237-38.

<sup>84</sup> Parker, quoted in Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor, Vol. II*, 238.

it is not clear) and the kind of cordial intimacy of a neighbor stopping by to borrow eggs or sugar.

In all of his works, as we have established, men stand at the narrative center. Their confusion—their sense of dread—operates as the chief thematic thread. Thurber's narrative structures help the viewer to identify with that figure. Thurber uses compositional devices to deepen this connection in suggestive ways in this particular image. The space between the couple and this woman weighs the work with psychological tension. The man is frozen between two women—one with her hand on him in deference and support, and the other pointing a gun towards him.

The strong vertical line of the door—bifurcating the composition—is a barrier between this gun-slinging woman and the couple. It also connotes a division between the outside world and the domestic space, which is conventionally associated with familiarity and safety. And then there is of course the question of the woman herself—where she comes from and what she plans to do. If the two give into her request for cartridges, she becomes an immediate threat. Her intrusion is evocative of the broader sense of crisis at the time this work appeared: she brings chaos from the outside world into their home; her disheveled features underscore this sense of turmoil.

The comfortable and dangerous collide in a number of the works in this series, often in ways were designed to trouble the viewer's sense of logic as well. Most of the time, this theme operates within a more entangled network of interpersonal relationships, linked by past intimacies, bound through marriage, or tied by one's affection (or conversely, loathing) for the other. The words of exasperation in "Seal in the Bedroom," for example, cast the argument in that narrative as part of a larger battle between two distinct personalities, one more apt to let his

imagination roam, the other not only grounded in reality but annoyed by her husband's lack of grounding (see fig. 2.1). Notably, this work represents another night scene, and like "Have You People Got Any .38 Cartridges?," includes an intruder (in the form of the seal). As with that work, the scene in "Seal in the Bedroom" occurs within the home, and more specifically the bedroom, a site with associations of comfort and restfulness but also with sexual negotiation and tension, which the seal seems to betray. Structurally, "Seal" addresses the viewer in a different way than "Have You People Got Any .38 Cartridges." The viewer can see the seal unbeknownst to both of the characters, hovering eerily above them.

In this work, Thurber's use of line is a critical component of the narrative. The bed is barely cobbled together and the bodies seem to melt into the bed. The seal is an unstable signifier within this context. It can be read literally—as proof that the sound the man heard was in fact a seal. Or it can read as a visual manifestation of the little man's fantasy about winning the argument. The man's downturned expression, as he turns away from his wife, only confuses matters. His expression hovers somewhere between fear and frustration.

The loose and evocative drawing technique exploited for unsettling effect in "Seal in the Bedroom" is another strategy that Thurber used to challenge his viewers' perceptions in these images. In this particular work, it gives the narrative a dream-like sensibility that led his contemporary William Murrell, in his *History of American Graphic Satire* (1937), to describe Thurber's figures in this image as "the children of the subconscious."<sup>85</sup> In his biography of the humorist, Kinney has gone so far as to argue that this technique is a visual language of personal expression. "The hand [Thurber] drew with had always seemed under remote control by inner

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<sup>85</sup> Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor, Vol. II*, 238.

selves of whom he apparently had little sway,” he argues.<sup>86</sup> Yet Thurber clearly thought of this technique in a more self-conscious way, as an invitation for viewers to situate their responses. As the stylistic differences between “Seal in the Bedroom” and “Have You People Got Any .38 Cartridges?” demonstrate, Thurber shifted his technique in different works, depending on the context.

In some cases, the unsettling nature of the narrative operates almost exclusively through the line quality itself. Consider yet another nighttime scene with the caption “Everybody Noticed It. You Gawked at Her All Evening” (fig. 2.5). This image represents Thurber’s technique at its most schematic. The style complements the bedroom setting—one of the places in a home where humans are also at their most vulnerable. The subject itself is fairly conventional: a woman worried about her husband’s wandering eye. But Thurber’s construction of this narrative gives the work a more threatening quality and makes the woman seem far more ominous. Like the animal in “Seal in the Bedroom,” she appears almost like a dream: a figment of the man’s deepest anxieties.

Thurber had already used this style in connection to his co-written parody *Is Sex Necessary?* In that context, it was clear that Thurber had self-consciously appropriated the technique of automatic drawing from psychoanalysis to evoke the idea of neurosis. He even went so far as to create parodies of automatic drawings. Notably, in a later interview about his cartoons series, he spoke about his technique in similar terms, calling his drawing style “stream of nervousness.”<sup>87</sup> This line technique was Thurber’s way to position the narratives within a psychoanalytical context. Murrell’s comments are among many in the period that demonstrate the power of this choice. Repeatedly in the 1930s, his contemporaries used words like

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<sup>86</sup> Kinney, *Thurber: His Life and Times*, xvi.

<sup>87</sup> Thurber, in *The Beast in Me*, 67, quoted in Graur, vxii.



“unsettling,” “weird,” “impenetrable,” “indefinite,” and even “portentous” to describe their reactions.<sup>88</sup>

But this semblance of automatic drawing is not the only device Thurber used to anchor his narratives within this discourse of psychoanalysis. Over and over in the series, Thurber makes allusions to Freud’s theories on sexual relationships, particularly the fear of castration that plays a central role in the Oedipal complex. The work called “Stop Me!” is especially suggestive in relationship to the Freudian notion of the castration threat. Within the Oedipal complex, women are lovers and enemies simultaneously. Their presence is a deep-seated reminder of subconscious feelings of maternal attraction; but because they lack a penis, their bodies evoke anxiety about punishment by the father, in the form of castration, for this maternal attraction.<sup>89</sup> This particular work takes place on an ice rink. Thurber worked with a loose pen stroke to achieve his composition and articulate the necessary details for viewers to understand the setting. A series of scratch marks articulated on the ice calls attention to not only the slightly chaotic energy of ice rinks, but also the athletic endeavors required to maneuver through the crowds gathering at such spaces. The marks also serve to remind us of the physical risks.<sup>90</sup> Within this scenario Thurber portrays a gigantic figure gliding rapidly towards the man, daring him to stop her action—an evocative embodiment of the comic grotesque.

In the Oedipal complex, women are contained through objectification, fragmentation, and

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<sup>88</sup> Howard Devree, “A Reviewer’s Week: Holidays in the Galleries,” X8; Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor, Vol. II*, 237-238; William Blair, *Horse Sense in American Humor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942, Reissue 1962), 310; J. Delancey Ferguson, “Horse Sense in American Humor: Review of Blair,” *American Speech* 18, no. 1 (February 1943), 55-56; for a discussion of Paul Nash’s reactions, see Graur, 46.

<sup>89</sup> For more on the Oedipal complex see Storr, *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, 32-34.

<sup>90</sup> Falling through the ice was so common in Central Park in the early thirties that one reporter for the *New York Times* took it upon himself to advise his readers which part of the pond to avoid if they did not want to get wet. See Lewis Nichols, “Central Park in the Winter,” *New York Times* (18 January 1931), 87.

fetishization.<sup>91</sup> In “Stop Me!,” Thurber creates a woman objectified as a grotesque spectacle. There is a hint of vulgarity to Thurber’s distorting gaze, for the woman’s dress is high enough to expose the upper part of her legs. Thurber is particularly evocative with his loose drawing technique in this passage, bringing her legs together into a crude crease suggestive of vulvic shape. The “v”-shape of her legs echo his depiction of her gaping mouth. These two particular features anticipate Mikhail Bakhtin’s descriptions of the comic grotesque in *Rabelais and his World* (1936, translated 1968), which focused attention on the body parts that account for its dynamic processes of growing and changing, such as the mouth, belly, breasts, and anus.<sup>92</sup> Within Bakhtin’s theories, Thurber’s body would be understood as a degraded body, or literally seen as closer to the earth and those mortal actions of eating, defecating, growing, giving birth, and dying, that we can never transcend no matter how much we might manage our bodies and actions in public.

Although Freud’s writings show that he was incredibly fascinated by women, he was never able to come to terms with their autonomous subjectivity in the same way that he could for men. In his writings on issues of identity and subjectivity, men were the universal being and women were a mysterious “riddle.”<sup>93</sup> Freud’s fascination with women was not a question of their subjectivity, notes feminist scholar Toril Moi, but a question of how their *difference* could be revealed through an understanding of “femininity.” Accordingly, many of Freud’s constructions of human development (or more accurately, male development) treated women as

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<sup>91</sup> A number of feminists have discussed this construction of the female. For the objectification of women, see Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures: Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); see also Toril Moi, “From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again,” *Signs* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2004), 841-878.

<sup>92</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1936, reprint 1984), 20-25.

<sup>93</sup> Moi. “From Femininity to Finitude,” 844.

an *object* rather than a *subject*—of nurturance, desire, and most frequently, anxiety. When Thurber uses this framework, he replicates this objectifying vision. And yet paradoxically, it is the woman who speaks and acts on the man, giving her more agency. Her body, which fills the space of the page, amplifies her overwhelming presence.

The female grotesque, according to Bakhtin, materializes ambivalences about human relations by returning the focus to the most primal level of growth and decay. Thurber's representation of masculine anxiety—as a female grotesque—is irrepressible and bloated, freakish and spectacular in its untethered, vulgar glory. In her own feminist take on Bakhtin's theories, cultural theorist Mary Russo reminds us of the fear and loathing around processes of reproduction, aging, and risk taking that the female grotesque exposes her degraded appearance.<sup>94</sup> A grotesque female is an undisciplined female who draws attentions to the social conventions of containment and control.

References to masculine anxiety and female threat operate in many works in similar fashion, summoning up a striking pattern. Consider a work called “Have You Fordot Our Ittle Suicide Pact?” (fig. 2.6). The idea of a “suicide pact” was one of the more macabre phenomena of the Depression.<sup>95</sup> Unlike most of the images in the series, Thurber presented his viewers with an image of attractive foreign woman who is pictured leaning forward in a pose that we might initially read as seduction. Yet in light of the caption, her pose carries two meanings. Using only a few lines in place of hands, Thurber encourages us to read her hands as both an embrace and a strangle. The work is the embodiment of the conflation of the seduction and threat that undergirds much of Freudian theory on sexual relations: hovering the line between sex and

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<sup>94</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 24, 63.

<sup>95</sup> For an example of this dark side of society, see “Suicide Pact Suspected,” *New York Times* (16 December 1931), 28.

death. The woman at the door in “Have You Got Any .38 Cartridges?” also evokes these ideas, as does the woman in the work captioned “Everybody Noticed It. You Gawked at Her All Evening.” In the former work, the woman is pointing her gun at the man’s groin. In the latter, the woman looms ominously over the man.

Freud’s theories of masculine anxiety offer a concise, if highly problematic, account for the feelings of inadequacy and nervousness that many men felt in the early 1930s. By casting anxiety through this framework, Thurber was presenting his viewers with a deeply unsettling metaphor for the historical moment. This particular aspect of the works also corresponded with cultural concerns from the period. In the 1929 report from the Ninth International Congress of Psychology, for example, the crisis of nerves was intertwined with concerns about waning masculinity itself.<sup>96</sup> The power of Thurber’s series lies in the ways they invoke cultural concerns through the vivid and direct language of the comic grotesque.

### **THURBER’S BODY POLITICS**

Thurber’s interest in challenging the desire for stability and control that marked the period was rooted in his skepticism with the efforts to socialize the individual in modern America. But his alternative, designed to express communal anxieties, operated in a highly gendered framework. Women stand in for both the sense of discordance that characterized the Depression and the attendant sense of entrapment encouraged by that period’s preference for responsibility, self-control, discipline, and containment. In what remains, I consider these works within the broader body politics of the period in which they intersect.

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<sup>96</sup> Rae, “Says Women Rule Minds of Husbands,” 22.

First, Thurber's cartoon series engaged critically with vernacular forms of psychology that maintained a positivist understanding of the self. Works like Walter Pitkin's *The Psychology of Happiness* (1929), mentioned earlier, made claims that "normal" Americans were happy, accommodating, and successful regardless of historical circumstances. Much like *Is Sex Necessary?*, Thurber's cartoon resists this constricting construction of subjectivity for a much more unsettling, dynamic, and anxious version of the modern self.

In this regard, Thurber's works can also be seen as presenting a counter narrative to New Deal rhetoric as well. Historian Susan Currell has linked the positivist rhetoric found in Pitkin's writings to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal discourse, drawing direct connections between the language around the "forgotten man" and the Pitkin's ethos of success. "Transforming [the forgotten man], rebuilding his strength, and adjusting him to a new economic and social organization," Currell writes, "appeared vital to enactment of national recovery."<sup>97</sup> National strength was rooted in a capitalist ethos of hard work within New Deal rhetoric, which was embodied in the strong male body, devoted as a politicized citizen to his country. This ideology was designed to smooth over hardship with an alternative rooted in communal obligation.

Thurber's series is the equivalent of a nose-thumbing gesture at these efforts. His works challenge the optimistic tone of these ideologies with something more confounding. His narratives are puzzles designed to confuse the viewers and draw them into the sexual tension. His male bodies are anything but strong or decisive: pudgy, weak, passive, and silent. At the times, the women seem to almost consume the men with their looming bodies. Thurber's loose child-like linear technique amplifies this quality in the works. In some works, such as "Seal in the

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<sup>97</sup> Susan Currell, "Eugenic Decline and Recovery in Self-Improvement Literature of the 1930s," in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. Susan Currell and Christina Codgell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 45.

Bedroom,” figures and objects seem to ooze almost imperceptibly from one shape to another. In other works, such as “Stop Me!,” individual figures take on an almost zoomorphic quality: the giant grotesque woman’s arms evoke serpentine forms. Thurber encourages his viewers to experience the same “private disturbances” of his little men, as he called them, through these techniques, which are designed to elicit confusion and anxiety in his viewers as well. As his contemporary, cultural critic William Blair would write about these strange images, Thurber’s works represented a counterpoint to New Deal rhetoric—a belief that “the world was so complex that the only thing one could be certain about was uncertainty.”<sup>98</sup> In this respect, these works anticipate a more existentialist post-WWII mentality.

As with *Is Sex Necessary?*, Thurber’s series can also be seen as part of a larger body of cultural works in the interwar period that used the middle-class man as trope for probing social expectations of urban modernity. Thurber may have specifically drawn inspiration for his male figure from the novel *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis, in fact. Letters from the period show that Thurber admired Lewis for his critiques on the moral sanctity of the Midwest where both of the authors were from, in his books *Main Street* (1920) and *Arrowsmith* (1925).<sup>99</sup> In Lewis’s popular novel *Babbitt* (1922), the main protagonist George Babbitt is a real estate agent in a mid-sized city with a wife and two kids—who, despite having all the material goods one ever needs, feels hollow inside. Lewis carved out an intimate portrait of middle-class conformity in the form of a husband and father whose own seeming emptiness is echoed in the cowering bodies in Thurber’s cartoons. Both body types fail to live up to the ideals of modern manhood; both are pudgy, frumpy types. Thurber’s work engages with a different set of cultural concerns—not about boredom or emptiness, but panic. His works are a provocative analogue to this novel, which are

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<sup>98</sup> William Blair, *Horse Sense in American Humor*, 310.

<sup>99</sup> Kinney, *Thurber: His Life and Times*, 259.

rooted in a different historical moment, when the stock market crash had put the American economy into crisis.

The cartoon series also shares similarities with King Vidor's film *The Crowd* (1928), which showed in theaters only a few years before Thurber's series was published. Like *Babbit*, the work provided a critique of modern capitalism through an exploration of a family man who works in the corporate environment, in this case as a clerk. Yet whereas the character of Babbit is consistently a financially comfortable man in the novel, the protagonist in the story of *The Crowd*, named John Sims, struggles throughout the film against the mind-numbing effect of office work to provide for his family. Sims' family life unravels when his child is killed and is fired at work for failing to stay focused on his tasks. The pressure to find a new job drives Sims to near madness, contemplating suicide at one point in the narrative, and he is reduced towards the end of the narrative to working as a sandwich board carrier. While Thurber's narratives largely avoid this larger context of working in the office, they fall within this basic structure. But in Thurber's works, this framework operates specifically within a psychoanalytical discourse.

The fact that Thurber chose to cast his women in such negative light, often exploiting grotesque imagery to marginalize them, distinguishes his series from the works by Lewis and Vidor in important ways. In Vidor's and Lewis's works, the men at the center of the narratives feel pressure to support their wives. Yet, unlike in Thurber's works, these women are sympathetic figure types; at times they are henpecking, at other times they are supportive. In these respective works, these women are often used to stand in for both the responsibilities of these men and the greater purpose that drives their commitment to capitalist work ethic. By contrast, in Thurber's works the women become the physical embodiment of the pressures of

responsibility. All of the concerns about society are filtered through their irrepressible bodies that appear again and again as a threat.

This itself is a significant component of Thurber's series. The 1920s had marked a period of significant gains for women beginning with women's suffrage, but also manifest in greater opportunities for women professionally, including at the very office where the humorist worked. The cartoons make a mockery out of these gains by transforming modern, assertive women into a tired paradigm of female deviance, or castrating, emasculating sexual and material demands.<sup>100</sup> Notably, the Depression was a period of backlash against women's rights. New Deal policies on federally supported employment privileged male employment over women. In New Deal rhetoric, the reassuring image of traditional families was repeatedly conjured as a symbol for a stable America.<sup>101</sup> Thurber's works are a part of this process of containment. One of the most fundamental contexts for Thurber's series was *The New Yorker*, where both women and men worked on images about sexual politics. Thurber's works completely subverted the subtle dynamics found in images like Shermund's drawing about flirting, discussed earlier in this chapter. They re-imagined sexual relationships with a striking Freudian framework that invoked the female grotesque. As such, his works were problematic, if powerful, embodiments of middle-class masculine anxiety at the beginning of the Depression. Thurber's cartoons encoded

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<sup>100</sup> These works, it is worth noting, can be tied to a much longer history of misogynist satire made to reduce women's achievements. This strategy was used in nineteenth-century France in Daumier's "Bas Bleus" series, and in the U.S. in the 1910s in anti-suffragette imagery. For more on these types of satire, see Janis Bergman-Carton, "Conduct Unbecoming: Daumier and 'Les Bas-Bleus,'" in *Femmes d'esprit: Women in Daumier's Caricature*, ed. Kirsten Powell and Elizabeth Childs (Middlebury, Vt: Middlebury College, 1990), 67-85; and Todd, "*New Woman*" *Revised*, 26-28.

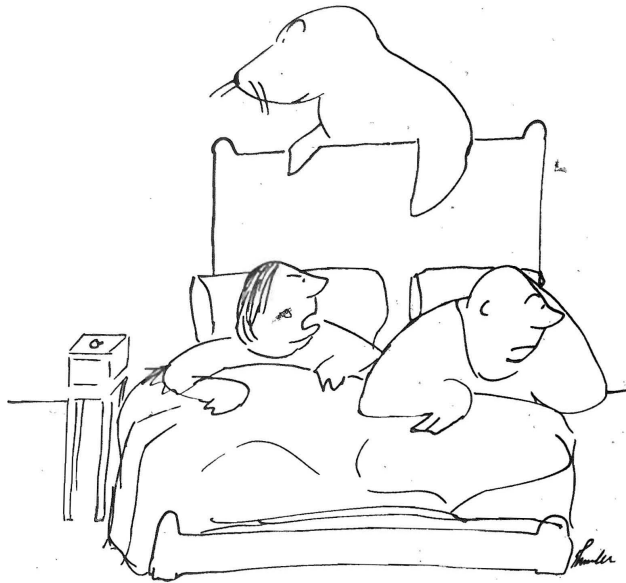
<sup>101</sup> For more on this backlash, see for example, Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); and Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2000); and Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).



communal anxieties caused by a variety of social and economic issues—ranging from the stock market crash to expectations of fortitude within capitalist culture—within a cast of sexual politics that relied on a very misogynistic understanding of women.

Thurber's cartoons were founded on an ethos of personal freedom that privileged ambivalence and anxiety as life-affirming alternative to the social expectations of middle-class manhood rooted in ideals of accommodation, strength, and conformity. In the next chapter, I will turn to satires that deal with working class concerns. For leftist artists Gardner Rea and Jacob Burck, the subject of Chapter Three, the comic grotesque played a very different role. For both artists the comic grotesque provided a pathway towards a more collective sense of subjectivity rooted in political consciousness.

CHAPTER TWO FIGURES



*"All right, have it your way—you heard a seal bark!"*

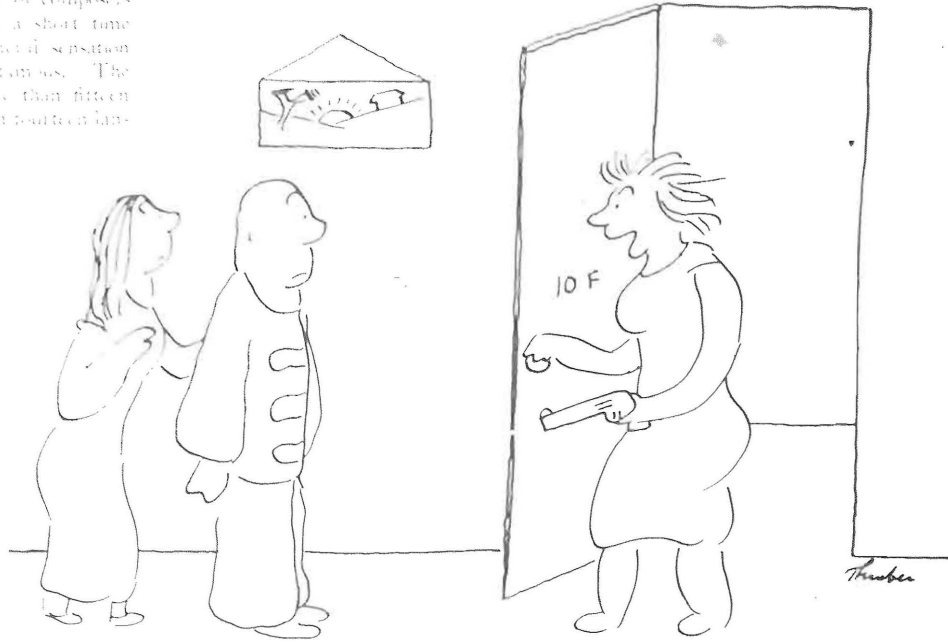
Figure 2.1: James Thurber, "Seal in the Bedroom," *The New Yorker* (30 January 1932), 11.



*"When I Realize That I Once Actually Loved You  
I Go Cold All Over"*

Figure 2.2: James Thurber, "When I Realized that I Once Actually *Loved* You I Go Cold All Over," in *Seal in the Bedroom and Other Predicaments*, 1932.

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"Have you people got any .38 cartridges?"

Figure 2.3: James Thurber, "Have you People Got any .38 Cartridges?" *The New Yorker* (5 December 1931), 15.



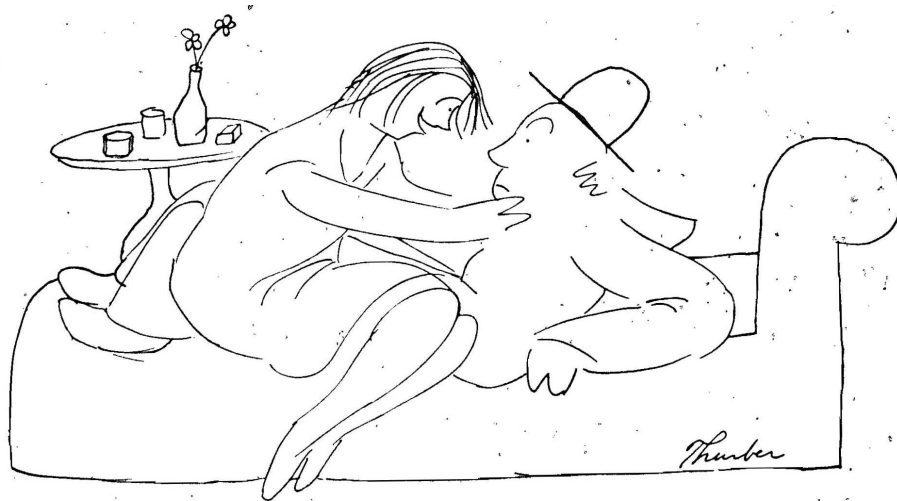
"Stop me!"

Figure 2.4: James Thurber, "Stop Me!," *The New Yorker* (27 February 1932), 11.



*"Everybody noticed it. You gawked at her all evening."*

Figure 2.5: James Thurber, "Everybody Noticed It. You Gawked at Her All Evening," *The New Yorker* (20 June 1931), 13.



*"Have you Fordot our ittle suicide pact?"*

Figure 2.6: James Thurber, "Have you Fordot our ittle suicide pact?," *The New Yorker* (12 March 1932), 13.



Figure 2.7: Barbara Shermund, Untitled, *The New Yorker* (1 July 1928), 30-31.



Figure 2.8: James Thurber, Untitled, in *Is Sex Necessary?* (1929), 45.

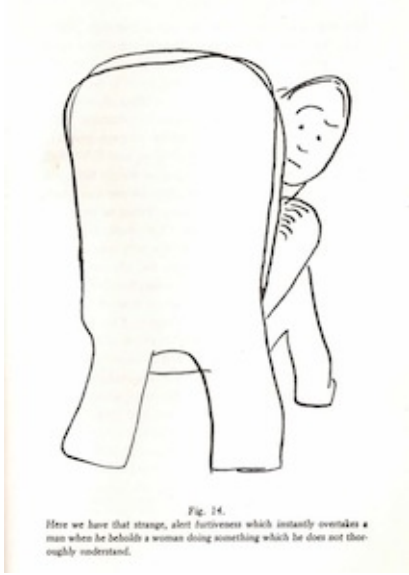


Figure 2.9: James Thurber, Untitled, in *Is Sex Necessary?*, 1929.

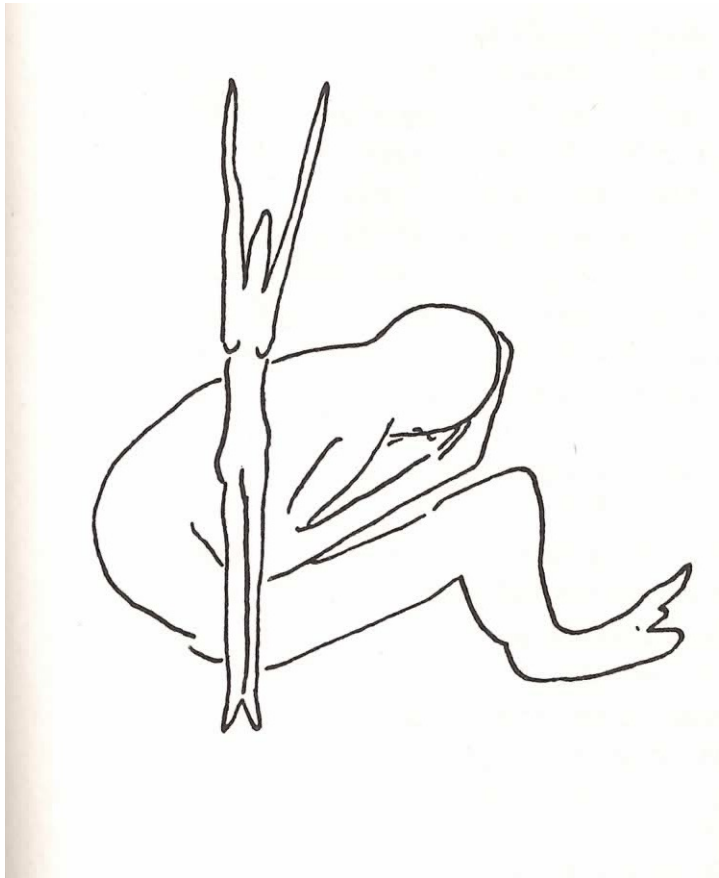


Figure 2.10: James Thurber, "Unconscious Drawing: Plate II," in *Is Sex Necessary?*, 1929.

### Chapter Three

#### DEFORMED, CHAINED, AND MAIMED: JACOB BURCK, GARDNER REA, AND THE LEFTIST CRITIQUE OF NEW DEAL CAPITALISM

Nine years after the U.S. government shut down *The Masses*, a group of prominent liberal and leftist artists and intellectuals—including William Gropper, Maurice Becker, Hugo Gellert, John Dos Passos, Lewis Mumford, and Upton Sinclair, among others—came together to create a periodical in the spirit of the WWI-era monthly called *New Masses* (1926-48).<sup>1</sup> Like their predecessors at *The Masses*, the group involved in this enterprise imagined the new magazine as a cultural and political hub for leftist activities. Also like the earlier publication, *New Masses* was designed to include commentary, fiction, and graphic satire. In terms of its politics, however, the magazine embraced a somewhat different ideological stance. The twenties had been marked by a significant shift in the contours of the American left, and by the mid-1920s the American Communist Party (hereafter CPUSA) had emerged as the most influential force within leftist politics. Although *New Masses* began with the goal of addressing the interests of Communists, socialists, and left-leaning liberals, by 1928, under the editorship of Michael Gold, it became closely aligned with Communism. In this capacity, it became one of two major publications during the Depression to publish proletarian leftist graphic satire. The other major publication was the daily newspaper *Daily Worker* (1924-56), which had been created as an engine of the CPUSA. Whereas *New Masses* tended include cultural and intellectual debates

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<sup>1</sup> The original roster of contributing editors included contributors to the original *The Masses*, as well as a number of younger faces. In addition to those already listed, other editors included Carl Sandburg, Eugene O'Neill, John Sloan, Art Young, Stuart Davis, Adolf Denn, and Joseph Freeman. Andrew Hemingway includes a list of the complete staff in his discussion of the founding of this magazine. His history of *New Masses* also includes passages from their first issue that demonstrates founders' enthusiasm for the Russian revolution, their devotion to the worker, and their opposition to capitalism. See Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 8-10.

about the role of arts among their concerns, *Daily Worker* focused exclusively on the day-to-day struggle of the working-class during the Depression.

Both journals included an overlapping readership of anti-capitalist political leftists and both had overlapping contributors. Both also featured striking works that drew on the comic grotesque as a means to pose meaningful questions about the government's efforts during the Depression. This chapter uses two particularly evocative images from these publications as the basis for a larger examination of this strategy: Communist artist Jacob Burck's "Roosevelt's Offer to the Veterans" in *Daily Worker* (13 May 1933); and leftist artist Gardner Rea's "When Do they Stop and Sing?" in *New Masses* (17 September 1935) (figs. 3.1 and 3.2).

"Roosevelt's Offer to the Veterans," by Burck, is a satirical response to the new president's proposal for out-of-work WWI veterans who had constituted one of the largest groups of the unemployed in the first years of the Depression. The satire—a lithograph—depicts three amputees chopping wood in a forest labeled "Camp Roosevelt," a nickname for President Roosevelt's very first government work program, the Civilian Conservation Corps (hereafter CCC).<sup>2</sup> The CCC was a program that relocated unemployed men from urban areas to state and national forests across the country where they would work for a small wage on new construction, conservation, and infrastructure repair. Roosevelt was against offering veterans direct aid, and had instead used political incentives to encourage them to sign up for this program.<sup>3</sup> As a Communist, Burck found Roosevelt's strategy for assistance inherently exploitive. His image of the veterans is a striking reminder of the unemployed veterans' previous sacrifice for the nation

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the CCC program, see Hubert D. Humphreys, "The History of an Idea Whose Time Had Come: Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps," in *The New Deal and Public Policy*, ed. Byron W. Daynes, William D. Pederson, Michael Ricards (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 47-62.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Roosevelt offered the veterans guaranteed entry into the CCC. See "Roosevelt Blocks Paying Cash Bonus; Aids Idle Veterans," *New York Times* (12 May 1933), 1, 3.



during WWI. But his work also evokes more unsettling themes of violence and fragmentation through its grotesque presentation of their maimed bodies, their laboring actions, and the logs themselves—provocatively resembling the veterans’ amputated legs. While the political critique is pointedly direct, these elements also raise questions about the broader purpose of this image in its various contexts: as an attack against the Roosevelt Administration, as a work about the risks of military service, and as a work made during the Depression for a Communist audience.

Rea’s work “When Do they Stop and Sing?” is a line drawing cartoon of a man and woman witnessing a group that appears to be members of a chain gang. Chain gangs had been the main form of incarceration in the South since the early twentieth century and were frequently attacked by liberals and radicals for their inherent cruelties.<sup>4</sup> Initially, Rea’s work seems to be part of this larger critique. Through the woman’s remarkably flippant question, he seems to be mocking the pair’s outrageous callousness towards the workers. Yet the male figure in the foreground is not an anonymous guard but a caricature portrait of General Hugh S. Johnson, who was the head of the New York division of the Works Progress Administration (hereafter WPA) at the time (for comparison, see photo, fig. 3.3).<sup>5</sup> The association with Johnson widens the symbolic implications of the image. The satire acts as a bold indictment of the treatment of the WPA program’s workers. Yet the artist’s representation of the background group also complicates this interpretation because the workers themselves are not sympathetic types—that is, they are not merely downtrodden but deformed. Rea depicts the group as more ogre-like than

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<sup>4</sup> The literature of chain gangs in the early twentieth century is rich. See, for example, Alex Lichtenstein, “Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South: ‘The Negro Convict is a Slave,’” *The Journal of Southern History* 59, no. 1 (February 1993), 85-110; Alex Lichtenstein, “Chain Gangs, Communism, and the ‘Negro Question’: John L. Spivak’s *Georgia Nigger*,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Fall 1995), 663-58; and Frank Tannenbaum, “Southern Prisons,” in *Darker Phases of the South* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924), 74-115.

<sup>5</sup> It is more difficult to pin down the identity of the woman, but as I discuss in more detail later in this chapter, she resembles both Eleanor Roosevelt and Johnson’s assistant Anna M. Rosenberg.

human, as bald creatures with broad noses and prominent overbites. As with Burck's satire about the government made two years earlier, the effect of these grotesque bodies is unsettling, and their purpose in this cartoon initially ambiguous—but also highly suggestive—within both its political context and within the venue of the leftist press in which these works appeared.

Neither of these graphic satires is well known in art historical scholarship, yet both share certain qualities that make them especially rich subjects for a much deeper investigation.<sup>6</sup> Both are critical of the federal government's treatment of workers, but both also engage themes of pain, violence, degradation, and enslavement through the deformation of the laboring body. Each artist has a different technique, but both arrive at a similar arena of signification. For these artists, the laboring body was a productive means through which to express broader concerns about issues of autonomy, justice, exploitation, and the role of the federal government. Both also shared an overlapping readership. *Daily Worker* was an organ of the U.S. Communist Party and the main paper in which proletarian radicals could find daily coverage of perceived injustices, read propaganda against capitalism, and track the efforts of worker revolt through strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of collective action. *New Masses* had also been closely affiliated with the Communist Party since 1928.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> While largely unknown today, both Rea and Burck were widely known in the period. Rea was celebrated as a "nationally famous artist" in *New Masses* advertisements. See, for example, a cartoon context advertisement in *New Masses* (28 January 1936), 17. Similarly, *New Masses* editor Mike Gold was among the well-known radicals to praise Burck's art in his book of satire, Jacob Burck, *Hunger and Revolt: Cartoons by Burck* (New York: Daily Worker, 1935). William Murrell also singles out Burck as one of the most effective satirists of the Depression in William Murrell, *History of American Graphic Humor*, vol. 2 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1938), 249. See Judith Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), for a more recent discussion on Gardner Rea's work in the context of his *New Yorker* cartoons; see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 31-34, for a discussion of Burck's work, mainly in relation to his work as a painter. Neither of these recent texts explores these artists in relationship to their leftist satire.

<sup>7</sup> *New Masses* had begun as a more ideologically open-ended monthly, its contributors having wide range of leftist and liberal perspectives. In 1928, Mike Gold took over as the chief editor, transforming it into a more narrowly defined proletarian journal. For a more detailed history of the evolution of *New Masses*

These works also share another important quality for our investigation: both present a vision of federal programs that boldly and provocatively challenges the New Deal rhetoric and imagery that the government used to affiliate its initiatives with ideas of healing, hope, recovery, strength, and love of country. One of the most recognizable symbols of the New Deal, for example, was the strong healthy male worker seen in any number of posters for the CCC that would be distributed over the decade (see figs. 3.4 and 3.5). Rea's and Burck's satires subvert this construct in profoundly unsettling ways. Through their broken and deformed bodies, they materialize the exploitive aspects of the New Deal that are smoothed over by official rhetoric. The grotesque serves as a device to undermine romanticized notions of New Deal citizenship that were founded on capitalist principles with an alternative designed to confront the viewer in a viscerally disruptive way, with the goal of incurring communal outrage towards the system. In this capacity they also participate within a broader visual and literary discourse in the period that engaged with the grotesque as a means to expose and explore degradation within the capitalist system, engendering class consciousness in the process. Considering them within this discourse not only enriches our understanding of these particular works, but also provides a greater insight into the visual strategies of the political left during the Depression.

## INTRODUCING THE ARTISTS

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over the years, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 15-20. For a look at its role within the broader context of leftist publications in the 1910s to 1940s, see Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "Art on the Left in the United States, 1918-37," in *Art and Art Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1997), 215-46. However, Marquardt's essay is marred by some problematic inaccuracies, including the false claim that *New Masses* primarily used photography after 1933, when in fact it continued to primarily utilize graphic satire and illustration as its main visual forms throughout the decade.

For both Burck and Rea, the power of political satire was predicated not only on the strength of their message but also on the visual forms and pictorial structure of a given work. Each had developed his set of satirical strategies and techniques from years of working as a graphic cartoonist in a different kind of publication. Burck, a Polish immigrant who grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, showed an aptitude for graphic arts early on. At the age of 17, he received a scholarship from the Citizens' Culture Committee in New York, where he moved to study art with the radical political cartoonist Boardman Robinson.<sup>8</sup> He joined the Communist Party two years later, in 1926, and started publishing his cartoons in *Daily Worker* in 1927.<sup>9</sup> By the time the stock market crashed in 1929, he had become one of the Communist newspaper's most frequent contributors, his political satires appearing at least once a week and usually on the front page.<sup>10</sup>

To be a Communist at this time—during what was known as the Third Period (1928-35)—meant to aid efforts towards a proletarian revolution. At the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International Party (the Comintern) in 1928, the Party had called for its members to engage in class war, agitating against all entities that supported the world capitalist system, including social democracies and liberals seemingly sympathetic to social injustices.<sup>11</sup> Burck understood his art within this framework to be a weapon against the capitalist state and business interests, as well as capitalist and imperialist entities abroad. As a cartoonist for *Daily Worker*,

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<sup>8</sup> Before moving to New York, he studied at the School of Art in Cleveland. For biographical details see Burck, *Hunger and Revolt*, 247; and Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson probably helped connect him to the *Daily Worker*. Robinson had also worked at the magazine, and had been a major figure at *The Liberator*, which had operated as the major radical magazine in publication in the first half of the 1920s.

<sup>10</sup> He would also make works for other leftist publications in the period, including *New Masses*. However, as the newspaper's most frequent contributor, his artistic identity was most closely tied to *Daily Worker*.

<sup>11</sup> For a broader discussion of the Third Period and its impact on the arts in the U.S., see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, chapter 1, 7-46.

he viewed himself as a “fellow-worker” among his readers, most of whom were working class and most who were either Communist or sympathetic to the Party’s ideals.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, Burck also sought techniques and strategies that would imbue his work with a sense of urgency, with the goal of empowering his viewers, and in this capacity, inciting them toward political action.

Burck chose to work in the lithographic technique that had long been tied to a tradition of protest in graphic arts in Europe and the U.S. since it was first adopted by French satirist Honoré Daumier and his contemporaries at the satirical papers *La Caricature* and *Le Charivari* in the 1830s. While he may have learned lithography while still in Cleveland, it is more likely that he developed it through working with Robinson in New York. Along with Robert Minor, John Sloan, and many others, Robinson had exploited the crayon’s expressive qualities in political satires published in *The Masses*, such as his haunting anti-war cartoon “Europe 1916” (fig. 3.6). As discussed in Chapter One, the contributors to *The Masses* had been against American entry into war not because they were pacifists per se, but because they believed the conflict was manufactured to support capitalist business interests. Here, Robinson combines the symbol of death as embodied by the grim reaper with an illustration of a popular idiom for blind obedience—as represented by the carrot-led donkey—to sharply criticize Europe’s descent into war. Applied to scathing critiques of the government and corporate interests, the unfinished looking, rough crayon line provided Burck’s works with a similar sense of directness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Burck, *Hunger and Revolt*, “Dedication,” n.p.

<sup>13</sup> In Chapter One, I discuss how this style was often viewed as a form of personal handwriting. A lot of printmakers in the period were drawn to this technique for similar reasons. For a much broader discussion of lithography in the 1930s, and other examples of contemporary lithographers, see Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Although Burck tended to work in a somewhat more controlled style than did Robinson, like his teacher he recognized that the crayon could be exploited for dramatic effect. Also like Robinson, he was concise about his compositional choices. In “The ‘American Standard’ of Living,” for example, he uses just five figures to make a broad commentary on the conditions of the Depression (fig. 3.7). These figures are the collective of humanity. Whether young, old, black, disabled, or able-bodied, they are united in their basic need for sustenance.

Typically, he would leave these narrative details out of the work, focusing instead on the human body as his primary vehicle for expressing sociopolitical meaning. “Roosevelt’s Offer to the Veterans” is a rare exception; in this case the forest setting is a core component of the attack. As can be seen in both “The ‘American Standard’ of Living” and “Roosevelt’s Offer to the Veterans,” he also tended towards naturalistic depictions of his individuals. His satirical message was expressed not so much through extreme distortion but through the pointed juxtaposition of forms and objects. This is not to say that he avoided caricatural distortion altogether. In many of his attacks on those he considered to be capitalist enemies, he drew attention to their more unsavory or grotesque physical features to create an outward representation of their corruption or greed. His scathing caricature of a naked President Herbert Hoover, first published in 1931, is one especially striking example: unclothed and wedged into a claw foot tub, the president’s corpulently grotesque body is a crude but direct display of government greed (fig. 3.8).<sup>14</sup>

Even here—in a one of his more caricatural works—much of the satirical bite derives not so much from these corporeal exaggerations as his re-contextualization of Hoover’s obese body. Hoover is not in any bath, after all, but a milk bath, and milk baths held a special place in popular culture in the period. Rumored to be used by starlets, they had associations with youth,

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<sup>14</sup> This particular work also appeared in Burck, *Hunger and Revolt*, 21.

beauty, vanity, and celebrity.<sup>15</sup> Using milk baths during the Depression also signaled luxury and wastefulness because milk was very expensive and in short supply. In his cartoon of Hoover, Burck took a well-worn symbol of greed—as visualized through the gluttonous body—and then destabilized this signifier by placing it within this new—and more vulgar—context. His body depicted as naked in the privacy of the bathroom, this cartoon also violates Hoover’s symbolic role as head of state.<sup>16</sup>

Even though many of Burck’s works appeared naturalistic, they were highly contrived arrangements. As his satire of Hoover evidences, he would also use labels to help navigate his viewers to a particular discourse of meanings between the objects he selected and arranged. In the case of this work, the headline of the newspaper directs viewers towards reading the entire scene within the context of hunger issues that had exploded in the wake of Depression.<sup>17</sup> In “Roosevelt’s Offer to the Veterans” he similarly guides viewers towards a set of political events tied to the newly developed CCC, vis-à-vis the sign in the foreground that reads “Camp Roosevelt.”

Often, as in “Roosevelt’s Offer to Veterans,” he only used naturalism up to a point, combining his aesthetic with more unnatural elements that have an unsettling effect. While the three figures in this cartoon are proportionally correct, the site on the bodies where their legs are

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<sup>15</sup> One of the more famous figures associated with milk baths was the original Ziegfeld Follies Girl, Anna Held. As a publicity stunt in the 1890s, Florenz Ziegfeld claimed that the secret to Held’s beauty was a daily fresh milk bath. For more on this stunt, see Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Burck’s work about Hoover also shares notable similarities to Daumier’s “Gargantua,” discussed in the Introduction and later in Chapter Four, which depicts the king as an obese giant squeezed into his throne.

<sup>17</sup> Numerous examples can be found in Burck, *Hunger and Revolt*.

missing is depicted unnaturally: abruptly and without any suggestion of bandaging or wounds.<sup>18</sup>

Burck depicted the legs of the man in the foreground that faces viewers with two vaguely defined cylinders that seemed to be chopped clean—their shapes provocatively resembling the log he cuts. Burck depicts the man in the background somewhat differently, with a more rounded stump. But here too, this decision is suggestive since the angle of his leg encourages viewers to read it alongside the area he has chopped out of the tree. The difficult physical labor they perform would be impossible for men in their condition. This constitutes another tension with conventions of naturalism.

Burck's goal for his satires, he explained in a series of mid-1930s essays, was to "tear off the surface veil of things and expose the thing itself in its naked reality."<sup>19</sup> He believed that his works were the expression of "historical materialist conception of human life, or society" as opposed to what he characterized as the "forms of trickery employed by manufacturers" and others interested in maintaining cultural and political hegemony under American capitalism.<sup>20</sup> The symbolic potential of the figures was an important component in this process. In his works, they often became the surrogates for the broader society: the black man and his son in "The 'American Standard' of Living," for example, becoming a synecdoche for African-American families in general. Yet he did not only treat the body as a language of potent symbolism. He also used it as a means to create more visceral reactions within and among his viewers. His imagery was designed to invoke a new perspective thought to be impossible in more naturalistic

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<sup>18</sup> This aspect of the work also invites comparison with Robert Minor's "A Perfect Soldier," discussed in Chapter One. Although their goals are ultimately different, both fragment the bodies in ways that are distinctly and unsettlingly unnatural.

<sup>19</sup> This quote is in response to Thomas Hart Benton's work. Jacob Burck, "Benton Sees Red," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935), 5, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Burck, "Revolution in the Art World: A. for Proletarian Art," *The American Mercury* (March 1935), 334-335.



forms of representation. As Burck's contemporary, leftist theorist Henri Barbeusse, would explain in his Introduction for the artist's published collection of graphic satires, *Hunger and Revolt* (1935), for Burck it was necessary that "you [the viewer] penetrate this reality, that you see the truthful core of these presentations, until, with more and more ardent partisanship and more and more anger, you unite together."<sup>21</sup>

In this passage, Barbeusse emphasized that the grotesque was a vital tool that Burck used to draw these connections. Characterizing the artist's works as a "grotesque history that is hardly believable, a monstrous farce... that is a reality," he explained that his satire was: "not only something which takes place at a remote distance from your own body, it also touches you and trails after you, and which forces you, for good or for evil to play your role in this sad, collective melee."<sup>22</sup> Burck's goal was to implicate the viewer, Barbeusse argued, in "the role of the prime mover, the role of the mere instrument, and often, dear comrades and friends, even the role of the victim."<sup>23</sup> Through this act, he explained, came a deeper political consciousness:

Nothing of that which you see...is exaggerated. It seems that the one has here the study of monstrous beings who are not of human species. But it is exactly thus, however, that these things come to pass...It is necessary that you penetrate to this reality, that you see the truthful core of these presentations, until, with more and more ardent partisanship and more and more anger, you unite together..<sup>24</sup>

Burck believed that grotesque imagery could break down barriers between the individual body and the larger world. Underlying the comic grotesque in "Roosevelt's Offer to the Veterans" were these views, as well as the particular political concerns tied to the programs and initiatives that the President Roosevelt was developing to bring the country out of the Depression.

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<sup>21</sup> Henri Barbeusse, "Introduction," in Burck, *Hunger and Revolt*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Although this is the only explicit mention of the grotesque in this introduction, throughout the short essay Barbeusse describes Burck's works in terms that evoke this idea—as works designed to shock the senses with their brutal imagery. See Barbeusse, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>23</sup> Barbeusse, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>24</sup> Barbeusse, "Introduction," 7.

Although Gardner Rea would come to share these views, when he began his career as a cartoonist he did not initially engage directly with leftist political activism.<sup>25</sup> Rather, he began his career in New York making lighthearted cartoons, first for the popular humor magazine *Judge*, and then at *The New Yorker*, from 1925 to the early 1930s. In 1934, he shifted course and moved from what was considered a highbrow magazine for the urban middle-to-upper middle class to the proletarian-centered, leftist publication *New Masses*. There are no records that he joined Communist Party and no documentation explaining this shift, though it is worth noting that such moves were not uncommon. As art historian Helen Langa discusses in her study on radical printmaking in this period, many artists were compelled by the social inequalities exposed by the conditions of the Depression to begin taking up social justice themes within their art.<sup>26</sup> Rea may have been similarly motivated. After his move, he became a strong advocate for the Party's broader critiques of capitalism and fight for social and economic justice through his works.

At *The New Yorker*, Rea had been known for working on two distinct types of comic expressions. The first, known as pantomime narratives, were multiple-panel cartoons with little to no text. A completely visual form of humor, the comic elements hinged primarily on two key components of storytelling: plot and point of view.<sup>27</sup> As his ten-panel cartoon titled "Second Thought of a Hard-Hearted Parent" (6 June 1931) evinces, these works often played with viewers' expectations by subverting conventional narratives for comic effect (fig. 3.9). Here, Rea leads the viewer to falsely believe she or he will see a happy reunion between father and son in

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<sup>25</sup> Gardner Rea, like Burck, was a Midwesterner who moved to New York as an adult. He grew up in Columbus, Ohio, where James Thurber also lived until the mid-1920s. Although there are no documents to confirm it, Yaross Lee has suggested that Thurber and Rea, who both attended Ohio State University, may have known each other. See Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 26.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion, see Helen Langa, *Radical Art*, especially 1-9, in which she defines radical printmakers as those concerned in the period with social justice issues.

<sup>27</sup> For a broader discussion of pantomime narratives, see Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 229-34.

the last panel by slowing down the narrative over several frames, suggesting through this process that the father has reconsidered his initial decision to send the young man off.

As was typical of such cartoons, Rea worked in a fairly abstracted linear style to create this form of comic art, exploiting the ways that subtle alterations between panels could (mis)lead his viewers. How, in “Second Thought of a Hard-Hearted Parent,” do we know the father actually has a change of heart? As humor scholar Judith Yaross Lee writes of such works, the joke is often “on us,” for seeking connections and details where there are none between the individual frames and the whole.<sup>28</sup> Rea also used this linear style in the other type of comic art he produced at *The New Yorker*: the single-panel cartoon accompanied by a textual “one-liner.” One of his earliest images for *The New Yorker*, “My Man, There’s a Fly in the Room” (27 June 1925), is fairly representative of the ways that he would use visual tricks and formal contrasts to generate laughs (fig. 3.10). This cartoon pokes fun at the wealthy man in the image through a whole array of visual contrasts—between the size of the men and the size of the room, between the room and (invisible) fly that bothers the wealthy man in the overstuffed chair in the center, and between the space of the room and its relatively few contents. Like his pantomime narrative, the work also engages viewers directly by encouraging them to search for the fly among the pictorial details.<sup>29</sup>

As Yaross Lee notes, “My Man, There’s a Fly in the Room” is an early work that also hints at Rea’s political sympathies, with its ridicule of the man’s aggravation over a fly in such a grand space.<sup>30</sup> His pantomime “Second Thought of a Hard-Hearted Parent” also represents the wealthy in unsavory terms, with the well-to-do father becoming even crueler by the end than he

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<sup>28</sup> Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, the viewer may be taking the “fly’s-eye” view in the scene.

<sup>30</sup> Yaross Lee, 171-72.

might have initially appeared. Although it would be simplistic to see his cartoons in *The New Yorker* merely as coded attacks on capitalism, Rea seemed unusually interested in making works for *The New Yorker* that highlighted the divides between the rich and the poor. Consider, for example, his cartoon captioned, “Have You Tried Numerology?” (8 March 1930)—made shortly after the November 1929 stock market crash—which shows a wealthy woman at a poor family’s apartment, offering ridiculous advice (fig. 3.11). While the one-line text acts as the main punch line, much of the humor derives from the absurd contrast between her appearance and the family she visits. The work does not exclusively satirize the wealthy woman—since Rea pokes fun at the impoverished family by stereotyping the father as a drunk—but it nonetheless represents her as painfully out of touch.

Rea began to work at *New Masses* early in 1934, shortly after its editors transformed the magazine from a monthly to a weekly format in an effort to gain wider readership. *New Masses* had struggled to stay afloat during the first years of Depression, and this change was accompanied with a shift away from theoretical essays towards more news-oriented content and the inclusion of film and radio programming reviews.<sup>31</sup> There, Rea immediately began publishing works that made the previously implied mockery of the rich brutally explicit. While the exact reason for Rea’s shift from the commercial magazine to the leftist weekly is not altogether clear, his new readers no doubt delighted in seeing his subversive act of thumbing his nose to his former clients.

Most of his works at *New Masses* shared a common set of themes. They either showed a form of class exploitation and contrast—as in “When Do They Stop and Sing?”—or they

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<sup>31</sup> For more on the details of this shift, see Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 20. A closer look at the magazine itself also evinces a greater awareness of the impact of mass culture on the public, and an effort to engage with this discourse through essays about the radio and film, in addition to reviews of specific movies or programs.

displayed the wealthy on their own as either decadent, greedy, or inane through the sardonic juxtaposition between word and caption. In these various cartoons, he continued to exploit the suggestive possibility of line drawing, but now using it to more prominently distort the figures themselves. Formally his works thus arrive at their critique differently than Burck's images. While Burke's images emphasize texture and substances, Rea's are more open and abstract, a reduction of details that makes line assume greater prominence.

Many of his pictures of the wealthy, for example, were hideously monstrous. The woman in the center of the cartoon captioned "As for Me, If the Revolution Comes I Shall Simply Ignore It" (20 August 1935) is not only corpulent. Her body is a strangely deformed grotesque: her breasts uneven and seemingly pouring out of her gown, her chin in triplicate, and her snakelike arms extending from her bulbous body to meet around a wide glass (fig. 3.12). Another work, captioned "Bertram Has Willed His Brain to Science" (27 March 1934), similarly shows the figures in the scene as grotesques, though not quite as deformed as the previous work (fig. 3.13). While the woman on the right is obese, all the figures have homely facial features. The man who has "willed his brain to science" seems to in fact have no brain; Rea depicts him with a miniature pointed head. Notably, in this work Rea uses grotesquery to not only visualize capitalist decadence but also to mock the false belief among the aristocracy that their success derived in part from better hereditary stock. The humor emerges from contrast between the allusions to intelligence in the caption and Rea's insulting caricature of the man.

Both of these works also highlight another feature common to Rea's satires of the wealthy. He tended to associate the bourgeois and aristocracy with femininity, more often depicting women as feminized symbols of decadence. Often when he caricatured aristocratic men, as in the latter work, he depicted them as not only ugly, but also posing in a manner that

was conventionally seen as feminine, in this case with his fingers delicately holding the stem of his glass.

“When Do They Stop and Sing?” also exhibits Rea’s use of grotesque distortion, though in this case he applied it to both the couple in the foreground and the workers in the background. Both Johnson and the woman next to him are portrayed as homely, unsavory characters with harsh features. The men in the background meanwhile, are completely dehumanized: their bodies hunched into rounded arcs. Here, it is worth noting that this grotesque presentation of a subjugated or impoverished group is somewhat unusual for Rea. In other works representing class contrasts, he tended to treat the poor in a more individualized way. His work captioned “Have You Consulted a Specialist” (12 June 1934) is more typical (fig. 3.14). A work that also critiques the government’s efforts to address the Depression, this particular cartoon mocks the administration’s relief agents and social workers authorized under the Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA) whose jobs were to assess and report on the economic crisis first hand.<sup>32</sup> Although the impoverished mother’s cheeks in the image are sunken in, she is hardly monstrous. Rather, her gaunt face visually marks her desperation and by extension, the inability to afford to “consult a specialist,” as suggested by the well-dressed—and well-fed—relief worker behind her.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> FERA was an emergency relief program that provided jobs and short term welfare. It was an unwieldy affair, designed as a temporary measure, and was replaced in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration. Cartoons in *New Masses* frequently critiqued the effectiveness of the program. A satire by Bernada Bryson from the 9 January 1934 issue, showing a relief investigator blithely questioning whether a gaunt child is truly hungry, is one of several works in this vein. For a useful discussion from the period on this early program and its operations, see Paul Webbink, “The Vast Relief Machinery: The Method and the Checks,” *New York Times* (18 November 1934), 3.

<sup>33</sup> This particular work also operates through a similar structure of pictorial contrasts to his images of class differences in *The New Yorker*, suggesting broader connections between these two stages in his career.

In a 1937 essay, Rea would argue that humor alone could not overthrow older systems—but it could make the process far easier. It could make exploitive systems laughable, he wrote, and the “ruling caste,” as he called them “...shown to be even more ludicrous—and far far stupider—than the most bumbling of their inferiors.”<sup>34</sup> Rea was interested in humor’s disruptive potential to subvert authority and through the act of laughter, viewers who were part of a leftist community fed up with the period’s crises, could gain a sense of collective empowerment and control in such works. For Rea, as for Burck, visual satire was a mode of expression that could empower the working classes—that could, in its most audacious and agitating, open up new ways of seeing. “When Do They Stop and Sing?” is an especially unsettling meditation on these ideas. To understand how both this work and Burck’s serve these broader goals, we must look more closely at the respective subjects of attack.

## **VETERANS AND THE CCC**

Through what political contexts did viewers encounter Burck’s and Rea’s satires of the federal government? In both cases, the works were but one component of a broader set of debates related to the roles and responsibilities of the federal government to its citizens during the economic crisis. Burck’s satire “Roosevelt’s Offer to the Veterans” may have been specifically focused on Roosevelt’s first major federal work program, the CCC, but its broader critique centered on how the government had treated WWI veterans. Veterans were among those

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<sup>34</sup> Gardner Rea et al., “Is Laughter a Weapon?: A Symposium,” *New Masses* (14 September 1937), 16-17.

hardest hit by the effects of the economic crash. In a group numbering more than four million, nearly half of them were unemployed in the early 1930s.<sup>35</sup>

The poor treatment of these veterans had been an issue of concern among political radicals and others sympathetic to their plight since the moment they had returned from the war. Unprepared to compensate them for their sacrifice, the U.S. government initially only offered about \$60 to each soldier, plus additional aid to the approximately 200,000 wounded for their injuries.<sup>36</sup> The years immediately following the war had been marked by a brief recession that had made especially difficult for these veterans to find jobs. Pressure grew from advocacy groups like the newly formed American Legion to better compensate the veterans, and in 1924 Congress overrode a veto by President Calvin Coolidge to create the World War Veterans Adjusted Compensation Act. This law provided what became known as a “bonus” pay of between \$500 and \$1000, but with a catch: the veterans would not receive their backpay until 1945.<sup>37</sup> The reasoning behind this delay was partly tied to financial constraints, since the cost of compensating all veterans would have made a profound dent in the national budget. But it was also rooted in ambivalence among some in the public towards funding the veterans, many of whom were non-white, immigrant, and/or working class.<sup>38</sup> The period had been marked by a surge of racial prejudice against those who were seen by some as a threat to traditional American

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<sup>35</sup> For these statistics see “Increase Revealed in Non-Service Pay,” *New York Times* (3 November 1932), 2; “Vets in Capital Convention Spurn Roosevelt Forced Labor Proposal,” *Daily Worker* (18 May 1933), 1.

<sup>36</sup> The treatment of WWI veterans is outlined in a number of general histories. For a basic discussion see Paul S. Boyer, “Bonus Army,” in *The Oxford Companion to United States History* (2001), retrieved at [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com) (accessed October 2013); see also Richard Rubin, *The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> See Boyer, “Bonus Army.”

<sup>38</sup> The Selective Service Act gave preference to unmarried men and exempted men who were in jobs that were thought to aid in the war effort. This inherently affected the demographics of the army. For a discussion of the composition of the draft, see Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).



values.<sup>39</sup> Instead of interpreting their demands as a call for justice, critics treated the veterans' protests as an attempt by those less deserving to exploit the American government. Coolidge was representative of the more callous position at the time, arguing that "patriotism that is bought and paid for is not patriotism."<sup>40</sup>

The concerns around this issue became more urgent during the Depression, when many veterans found themselves out of work. The years 1931 and 1932 were marked by regular protests across the country by veterans demanding they receive their "bonus" immediately. Readers in *Daily Worker* were kept informed of these various demonstrations and marches through articles and drawings, such as Burck's cartoon of organizing ex-servicemen, "We'll Fight for Our Class in the Next War," from April 4, 1932; and illustration of The Cleveland Veteran's conference in September 1932 (figs. 3.15 and 3.16). In the first of these two images, Burck also made allusions to the Communist ideology of class war through his caption, and through the sign that called the trio—and by extension all the paper's readers—to action against "Imperialist War." This image also harkened back to leftist critiques of WWI as an imperialist war fought by capitalist interests.<sup>41</sup> As outrage grew, these unemployed soldiers became a face of the war against capitalism that was the foundation of the Communist Party ideology in the Third Period.<sup>42</sup>

The largest protest event occurred in the summer of 1932, when more than 45,000 unemployed veterans and their families traveled to Washington, DC, from around the country—

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<sup>39</sup> Racial prejudice was manifest in numerous ways in the period, including the surge of interest in eugenics, the advancement of anti-immigration legislation, and the rise of lynching across the South.

<sup>40</sup> Rubin, *Last of the Doughboys*, 397. These views, it should be noted, echo the understanding of citizenship within WWI-era Preparedness rhetoric, as discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>41</sup> As Chapter One discusses, anti-war activists at *The Masses* viewed the war from a socialist perspective.

<sup>42</sup> This is evidenced visually, for example, in Jacob Burck's cartoon, "The 'American Standard' of Living," in which the veteran stands in as a surrogate for a broken nation.

by foot, on boxcars, and by hitchhiking—to demand they receive their bonus compensation as “honest debt” for their service. Calling themselves the “Bonus Army” and the “Bonus Expeditionary Force” (a re-appropriation of the WWI American Expeditionary Forces of 1918), this interracial group set up camp in vacant federal buildings and shacks along the Anacostia River a few miles from the Capitol building.<sup>43</sup> Their presence was striking for more than the group’s numbers. As a racially integrated group, these families were also an affront to racial prejudices of the time in the then-segregated city of Washington, DC. Responding to their demands, Congress approved a bonus bill early in the summer. This measure failed, however, when it arrived in the Senate. When the veterans and their families refused to leave, the Herbert Hoover administration ordered their evictions. During this operation, a scuffle between the veterans and the police killed one veteran. Fearing a Communist revolt, President Hoover ordered General Douglas MacArthur to restore calm. MacArthur exceeded the president’s orders and drove out the veterans with tear gas and bayonets. The Army then proceeded to burn their makeshift homes, much to the embarrassment of the president and the horror of much of the broader public.<sup>44</sup>

A cartoon by leftist artist William Gropper, “You Fight We Eat,” published in *New Masses* in July 1932, aptly expresses how radicals interpreted the government’s eviction and forcible removal of veterans (fig. 3.17). In the two-page, multi-panel satire, Gropper represents the eviction as part of an ongoing pattern of abuse of war draftees, beginning with WWI itself. His cartoon intersperses panels showing their various trials and tribulations with two biting caricatures that are repeated twice in the larger historical narrative: one of an obese man barking

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<sup>43</sup> See Boyer, “Bonus Army.”

<sup>44</sup> For details about these events, see Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, “The Legacy of the Bonus Army,” *Washington History* 19/20 (2007/2008), 87; see also Boyer, “Bonus Army.”

orders, symbolizing the “senators, preachers, politics and the fat boys,” the caption explained; and one of an obese man representing the “millionaires” and “captains of industry,” pictured gobbling up food at a table with a bag of money on it. His cartoon implies collusion between the politicians and millionaires, both caricatured similarly. By duplicating these scenes—first interspersed in the scenes of war-injured soldiers then interspersed in the scenes about the “bonus”—he also characterizes their actions as cyclical and thus, by extension, systemic. The panels end with the words “The War is not over, boys,” which—like Burck’s drawing of veterans in “We’ll Fight for Our Class in the Next War”—harkens a greater call to action.

Viewers of Burck’s 1933 cartoon “Roosevelt’s Offer to Veterans” had these marches in their minds when Roosevelt came into office in spring of 1933 with the promise to lead America into its recovery (see fig. 3.1). In his inaugural address of March 3, 1933, the president vowed to restore America to greatness with the “direct recruiting by the Government itself.”<sup>45</sup> In the second week of May, a smaller group of veterans returned to Washington—staying this time at Fort Hunt—to hold a conference where they requested that the new president respond to their needs by enacting new Bonus legislation. Like the four presidents before him, Roosevelt refused to give in to veterans’ demands. But instead of evicting them, he signed an executive order permitting the veterans to enter the reforestation camps that the administration had created under the newly formed CCC. The Bonus Marchers at Fort Hunt were given preference for enrollment: at the camps they would receive \$30 a month as well as food and shelter for their work involving road construction, flood control, landscaping, and similar duties.<sup>46</sup> This proposed salary was much lower than was typically paid within a comparable private industry position. *Daily Worker* published its own response to this offer the day after this order was signed, along with Burck’s

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<sup>45</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin D. Inaugural Address. (March 4, 1933).

<sup>46</sup> “Roosevelt Blocks Paying Cash Bonus; Aids Idle Veterans,” 1, 3.

“Roosevelt’s Offer to the Veterans.” Calling the CCC program “forced labor camps,” the editors likened Roosevelt’s solution to being “sold into slavery.”<sup>47</sup> Burck’s cartoon expressed a similar outrage but in different terms. He used the maimed bodies of the veterans as unsettling expression of their previous government “work” as conscripted soldiers during WWI.

To a group still fighting for back pay for their previous service to the country, the CCC seemed like yet another attempt by the government to exploit them for the needs of the State. Burck put this idea into visceral bodily terms, using amputation as a metaphor for the government’s continued abuse of its citizens. In so doing he also drew visual parallel between the CCC and the use of military conscription during WWI, which had been widely criticized by radicals as the monopolization of the male body for the purposes of the state in a war that they believed backed capitalist interests.<sup>48</sup>

This connection also alluded more generally to concerns by many on the left about the CCC’s ideological foundations, which were rooted in Roosevelt’s own interests in the transformative possibilities of civic work. The president had developed the CCC from a program he had initiated as governor in New York during his 1928-32 tenure. His commitment to this program was so strong that by 1931, he had been pushing for a state constitutional amendment to allow for the purchase of abandoned agricultural lands. According to historian Hubert Humphreys, this enduring passion had emerged from his own belief that “manly virtues” could be obtained through civic responsibilities and through working the land. He had developed a proprietor’s sense of responsibility to “conserve and enhance the lands and forests” from his father growing up in Hyde Park, which he then nurtured in his adult years through membership

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<sup>47</sup> “Vets Reject Forced Labor Camps: Like Being Sold into Slavery,” *Daily Worker* (13 May 1933), 1.

<sup>48</sup> For more see Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 58-59; and David Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent in World War I,” 63-68.

in the American Forestry Association and by serving as president with the Boy Scouts of America Foundation. While the CCC was developed to create economic relief, one of Roosevelt's goals was also to mold young men into virtuous citizens through civic work.<sup>49</sup>

This aspect of the program constituted an attempt to socialize young unemployed men into the national politic under and ideal of citizenship that prioritized civic responsibilities over personal needs. For Communists, this very notion of citizenship was troubling. But Burck's work may also be a commentary on the rhetoric supporting this program as well. To drum up support for the CCC, the administration wed this ideology of civic manhood to a discourse of military patriotism. This discourse was manifest both in the practical aspects of the CCC and the ways it was promoted by the government.

Because Roosevelt knew it would have the organizational abilities to manage the undertaking, for example, he placed the U.S. Army in charge of the program. Men who joined the CCC would leave their families behind to work alongside other men, sleep in barracks-like spaces, and eat the food provided to them. Much to the outrage of Communists who were advocates for racial integration, the program also followed military protocol by segregating blacks and whites into different camps.<sup>50</sup> The administration also drew more symbolic associations between the camps and active military duty. At the opening of the first camp, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt made a special visit to lead the crowd of men in patriotic songs. "I hope that you will carry on in peace times as you did in the war days, for that is the duty of every

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<sup>49</sup> Hubert D. Humphreys, "The History of an Idea Whose Time Had Come" 50-54. Discussion from the period on the program includes "1,800 Here Leave Gayly for Camps," *New York Times* (9 April 1933), 28; "Forestry to Take 274, 375 by July 1," *New York Times* (13 May 1933), 5.

<sup>50</sup> For critiques of the work conditions, see "Recruiting for Forced Labor Camps Increased," *Daily Worker* (21 April 1933), 3; "Vets Reject Forced Labor Camps; 'Like Being Sold into Slavery,'" 1; "Vets in Capital Convention Spurn Roosevelt Forced Labor Proposal," 1.

patriotic American,” she stated in a speech designed to rally them into action.<sup>51</sup> These calls harkened the words from President Roosevelt’s 1932 inauguration speech that called for treating the task of recovery efforts “as we would treat the emergency of a war.”<sup>52</sup>

WWI had been a period of dramatic restrictions on civil liberties in the name of saving democracy. Artists and activists were widely censored in that period for dissent under wartime ideology. As historian Christopher Capozzola writes, during that period, obligations to the nation came ahead of any other obligation.<sup>53</sup> For Communists in the Third Period, the rhetorical parallels in the construction of the CCC were disconcerting.<sup>54</sup> The CCC signaled the coercive abilities of the state to harness individuals in new ways. Even the visual parallels in the promotional material were striking. In CCC posters, the government invoked the imagery of hard male bodies that had also been central to pro-military Preparedness Movement from WWI, as exemplified most prominently Plattsburgh Training program posters from the 1910s (see figs. 3.4 and 3.5, and fig. 1.6).

Through the grotesque portrayal of his figures, Burck’s work recalls the anti-war critiques from the previous era to create a vividly discomfoting symbol of obligatory citizenship during the New Deal. His strange, fragmented—yet dutiful—men turn the image of the strong young man in the CCC posters on its head. At the same time, the works give vivid form to the continued disregard of veterans. In this image, these fragmented bodies act as provocative signifiers for a constellation of issues tied to ideas of government authority, capitalist interests, and male citizenship.

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<sup>51</sup> “Bonus Camp Viewed by Mrs. Roosevelt,” *New York Times* (17 May 1933), 10.

<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address” (4 March 1933).

<sup>53</sup> Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants YOU*, 24

<sup>54</sup> Critiques of Eleanor’s role, specifically, include “Recruiting for Forced Labor Camps Increased,” 3; for more on this perspective, see also Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*.

## “GENERAL JOHNSON’S CHAIN GANG”

Like Burck, Rea was also critical of the federal work program in his image of the chain gang, but the explicit target of his concern in his September 1935 cartoon was not the CCC or even Roosevelt, but General Hugh S. Johnson, the first regional head for the WPA in New York, which was itself the first city to activate the program after it was developed in the spring 1935.<sup>55</sup> Previous to this position, Johnson had acted as the head of the controversial business regulatory agency, the National Recovery Administration (hereafter NRA), which had been shut down after it was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Considered part of Roosevelt’s original “brain trust,” the administrator was frequently in the news—even named the *Times* “Man of the Year” in 1934—and thus easily recognizable (see photo, fig. 3.3). In “When Do They Stop and Sing?” Rea caricatured him by exaggerating his narrow eyes, his prominent nose and chin, and by placing him in the role of a chain gang prison guard.

The WPA had been developed initially as an expansion of the more limited Civil Works Administration (hereafter CWA), an emergency program that had been initiated to create temporary work projects to supply immediate employment relief. Unlike that agency, the WPA was designed to provide more robust employment through the implementation of longer term work projects. While the projects were wide ranging—from road construction, to teaching, to federal art projects—they were collectively believed to be valuable to national recovery both because of the jobs they created and because they contributed to cultural and industrial growth.

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<sup>55</sup> The WPA was passed as part of the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act. Johnson’s role was discussed in numerous newspaper articles in the period, and the details that follow come from these sources. For some examples, see “Strike by Unions has Begun in Fight on WPA Pay Here, Threatening Wide Tie-Up,” *New York Times* (8 August 1935): 1, 18; “Unions Calling Out 10,000 in Strike Against WPA Pay; Johnson Sees ‘Bitter Fight,’” *New York Times* (9 August 1935), 1.

Due in part to the scale of the program, one of the biggest challenges facing the agency involved compensation. A salary high enough to provide financial stability was crucial, for example, but should skilled and non-skilled workers be paid the same rate? The administration had to decide whether the rates should be commensurate with the private sector, and also had to arrange important particulars, such as the payment schedule, a vital issue in itself for those who desperately needed regular paychecks. While these decisions were mainly made in Washington, Johnson was in charge of managing them in New York, and more importantly, handling any dissatisfaction.

Initially, the administration had set a graduated salary that was equivalent to prevailing private sector rate, with each employee paid what was customary within their respective industry. As the program expanded at the end of July, the government decided to shift the payment schedule and cut the salary in an effort to discourage employees from becoming too dependent on government jobs. This provoked immediate protests from those who had joined the program, many of whom argued that the cut that would bring down the overall wage scale. For union members on relief wages, the pay cut was also infuriating because it constituted an affront to their ongoing efforts to raise the rates in the private sector. In response, about 300 skilled relief workers quit their projects in protest in early August, beginning what would turn into a series of demonstrations and strikes by WPA employees across the city. The four weeks leading up to the creation of Rea's work were marked by constant work stoppages—by unskilled laborers as well as teachers and other white-collar workers who similarly argued that the changes were unjust.

Since the protests were so widespread, Rea's viewers in New York were not only familiar with these events through the news coverage but were also either directly or indirectly involved



in the events as protestors or witnesses. And as the protests expanded, Johnson emerged as a central focus of outrage. In response to the protests, he took to the radio to dismiss all the strikers as anti-American Communists who hated the nation and exploited it for their own personal gain.<sup>56</sup> He also declared that any worker that left his or her post would be taken entirely off relief aid. This strikebreaking tactic, which was fully supported by Roosevelt, infuriated radicals who deemed it a “work or starve” strategy designed to extort the American public. To radicals, Johnson’s attempt to break the WPA-related strikes was a clear sign that the government’s recovery efforts were also not in their best interests, but instead served as a ploy to exploit the American citizens for cheap work.<sup>57</sup>

In the August 27, 1935, issue of *New Masses*, the publication’s editors called out Johnson as an “enemy of labor” in a scathing takedown of his efforts on behalf of the Roosevelt’s administration to thwart protests.<sup>58</sup> Two weeks later, Rea’s work became part of a multifaceted attack aimed to further vilify the administrator’s efforts. As the *New York Times* would report, the very same week that his work was published, a group of labor demonstrators took to the streets with a General Johnson effigy (which they ultimately burned), as well as chains and placards that proclaimed themselves “General Johnson’s Chain Gang.”<sup>59</sup> Rea’s work became the pointed visual companion to this protest. But it also served as more than an illustration of their point, for Rea imagined their plight in grotesque terms that made the issues of inequality, exploitation, extortion, and authoritarianism all the more vividly direct. The figures who

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<sup>56</sup> “Strike by Unions is Begun in Fight on WPA Pay Here, Threatening Wide Tie-Up.”

<sup>57</sup> See “Unions Defy Edict to ‘Work or Starve,’” *New York Times* (11 August 1935), 1; “Show-Down Today in WPA Strike Here,” *New York Times* (12 August 1935), 1; “Strike Collapses on WPA Work Here; 10,000 Fail to Quit,” *New York Times* (13 August 1935), 1.

<sup>58</sup> “General Johnson, Enemy of Labor,” *New Masses* (27 August 1935), 6-7.

<sup>59</sup> “WPA Pickets Burn Gen. Johnson in Effigy in Demonstration Against ‘Starvation Pay,’” *New York Times* (18 September 1935), 13.

represent the WPA workers—forced to “work or starve”—are rendered as broken down individuals, one with a bandage, and all of them oafishly slavish. The drooping forms above the group—resembling southern Spanish moss that inherently invokes the landscape of plantation labor. Rea used scale to further diminish them, their bodies dwarfed in size compared to the man and woman in front. And yet at the same time, Rea uses elements that suggest that they are also potentially dangerous: Hughes, in his capacity as a guard, rests his hand on his revolver in seeming anticipation of revolt.

And what about this woman in the image, who Rea paired with Johnson? She may have very well be a caricature of Johnson’s assistant Anna M. Rosenberg, who wore her hair in a similar way to the woman in the Rea’s satire, and who shared the caricatured woman’s pointed nose (photo, fig. 3.18). She may also be a caricature of another government figure such as Eleanor Roosevelt, who frequently campaigned in support of New Deal projects—and political radicals regarded as out of touch.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, a comparison between a photo from the period and the caricature demonstrates a remarkable visual similarity (photo, fig. 3.19). But she may also have served a more symbolic role: as a feminized surrogate of a government completely out of touch with its people, or even a dimly benevolent, clueless dowager—a representation of all unthinking fat cats.

Regardless of her specific identity, both her tall body and Johnson’s—depicted as figures looming over the workers—is a harsh condemnation of the New Deal program. Along with the practice of lynching, chain gangs were one of the cruelest manifestations of racial hatred against blacks in the post-Reconstruction south. Although not every prisoner in a chain gang was

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<sup>60</sup> For example, the first lady is derisively called “Queen Eleanor” in Margaret Wright Mather, “That’s Their Story,” *New Masses* (28 January 1936), 27; she is also criticized in relation to the CCC in “Recruiting for Forced Labor Camps Increased,” 3.

African American, as historian Alex Lichtenstein has shown, chain gangs were developed by southern officials under the belief that they would serve to control what they regarded as an inferior childlike race.<sup>61</sup> While authorities tended to overlook minor crimes of whites, they were brutal in their punishment of African Americans, sending them to labor camps for up to one year for petty crimes such as gambling, drunkenness, loitering, and vagrancy. The caption Rea uses to mock the woman invokes negative racial stereotypes tied to southern abuse of African Americans, particularly the claim during the era of slavery that blacks were inferior beings more naturally attuned to manual labor.

At these chain gang camps, convicts would be forced to perform difficult physical tasks tied to modernizing the road system. To keep them from escaping, they wore chains 12-24 inches in width, and would either sleep together in tents or in cages. Notably, southern officials saw the chain gang system not as an abusive program but as one rooted in progressive reform. Created after the abolition of “convict leasing” programs that sent prisoners to work for private agency, it was thought to mold better citizens out of the convicts—giving them “fresh air and sunshine,” wrote one advocate—while also modernizing roads and thus accommodating growth in industry.<sup>62</sup> Thus when Rea compared the WPA to the chain gang system, they were not only indicting the government for its treatment of workers; he was also drawing suggestive connections between this southern form of state-funded labor and the New Deal more generally.

When considering Rea’s use of this metaphor, it is important to note that his viewers would have been well aware of these critiques thanks to several films and literary works that had

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<sup>61</sup> Alex Lichtenstein, “Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South,” 91-94.

<sup>62</sup> E. Stagg Whitin, “Convicts and Road Building,” *Southern Good Roads* 5 (June 1912), 16, as quoted in Lichtenstein, “Good Roads and Chain Gangs,” 88. For more on the development of chain gangs, see Lichtenstein discussion on pages 85-93; see also Lichtenstein, “Chain Gangs, Communism, and the ‘Negro Question,’” 663-58; and Tannenbaum, “Southern Prisons,” 74-115.

been recently made to expose the chain gang's inherent cruelties.<sup>63</sup> While the most popular expression of concern in the period was *I'm a Fugitive on a Chain Gang* (1932), a film adaptation of Robert Ellison Burns's memoir *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* (1932), Rea's viewers at *New Masses* would likely have been familiar with the issue through two other works: Frank Tannenbaum's 1924 book *Darker Phases of the South* and George Spivak's provocatively titled novel *Georgia Nigger* (1932). The latter of these works had appeared in serialized form in *Daily Worker* in late 1932.<sup>64</sup> Unlike Burns's memoir and the adapted film—which focused on the tribulations of a white New York-born veteran—these works considered the chain gangs in structural terms. Both treated it as part of a larger set of injustices manifest in the southern economic system of sharecropping, used to control impoverished African Americans and limit their agency and any attempt to protest.

The books by Tannenbaum and Spivak also differed from Burns's memoir in another key way. Whereas Burns used conventions of sentimentality to connect to their viewer, both Tannenbaum and Spivak exploited strategies of sensationalism and the grotesque. The very title of Spivak's work is meant to make vivid the degraded conditions of blacks in the South, a point he emphasized with the use of abuse reports, prisoner complaints, and photographs that he stole while doing research. Similarly, Tannenbaum used provocative descriptions of the prisoners as “hunchback and cripple.” Rea seems to be engaging with these works in his depiction of the prisoners, but also in his caricaturing of Johnson. In both of these projects, guards were singled out for critique as “grotesque and barbarous” men, “often illiterate,” who would use “any method

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<sup>63</sup> Accusations of abuse were also regularly covered in the news. See, for example, “Inquiry on Chain Gang Death,” *New York Times* (13 July 1931), 9; “Jersey Boy, 14, Tells of Chain Gang Term,” *New York Times* (13 January 1933), 8; Virginius Dabney, “Chain-Gang Abuses in North Carolina: Charges of Brutal Treatment of Convicts Start Inquiry by Legislature,” *New York Times* (24 March 1935), E6.

<sup>64</sup> The contents of this work, and its serialization, are critically analyzed in Lichtenstein, “Chain Gangs, Communism, and the ‘Negro Question’: John L. Spivak’s *Georgia Nigger*,” 663-58.

of controlling” the prisoners. When Rea represents Johnson as a prison guard, his attack is directly meant to be agitating.

Rea’s work is also provocative in other ways as well, which become clear when we focus more closely on the figures in the background. Notably, he only includes a few elements that connect the workers to this penal system—a single chain, but not the familiar striped uniforms that the public associated with chain gangs in this period. The figures are drone-like, with no markers of individuality, seeming wholly unconscious of their enslavement. They labor in repetitive motions with their pick-axes, their bodies permanently hunchbacked, by their actions. For readers of *New Masses*, a politically-engaged community sympathetic to Communism, this narrative shares key features with their idea of capitalism: that is, an economic system in which workers labor endlessly for little to no real recompense. In “When Do They Stop and Sing,” Rea uses the purposefully agitating language of the comic grotesque in this way, to brutally mock and thus symbolically undermine the government as an engine of capitalism.

Through the subject of the “chain gang,” a motif that Rea’s viewers would have interpreted on multiple levels, the exploitive qualities of this system vividly come to life in his version. But the grotesque bodies also suggest something more: this somatically deformed type makes the psychic effects of modern capitalism visually manifest in a brutally satirical way. This expressive language is direct, but also unnerving. In both this work and Burck’s image, government work is conceived in viscerally discomfoting terms. In both works, this strategy can be better understood in relation to analogous uses of the comic grotesque from the period.

## **THE LABORING BODY**

While we often affiliate labor with images of the strong muscular male body—his heroic proportions signifying either fortitude or political defiance—in many images in the first half of the twentieth century, corporeal deformation or bodily subversion operated as a highly legible language through which to express the very character of labor within the capitalist system.<sup>65</sup> One of the best known expressions is Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1935), and more specifically the scene in the first act in which the Tramp struggles and ultimately fails at his job as an assembly line worker in a factory. To keep up with his job screwing nuts, he climbs onto the factory’s conveyor belt, only to find himself literally sucked into the large machine (fig. 3.20). The machine stops, shifts into reverse, and spits him out as a changed man, twitching and dancing about, attempting to use his two wrenches on anything that passes before him. Although his movements are almost balletic they are also unpredictable, and as such they become the bodily annunciations of the madness of this kind of work. But perhaps more importantly, they also signify the disobedient body rebelling somatically against the clocks, timers, lunch hour schedules, and repetitive motions that marked industrialized labor.<sup>66</sup> As leftist admirers in *New Masses* noted in this period, in this framework the Tramp became the physical embodiment of proletarian protest, his body defying the ordered ideology of the modern capitalist system.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> A number of scholars have discussed the relationships between the strong muscular male body and proletarian ideology. See, for example, Helen Langa, “Imag(in)ing Labor: Fine Prints and Their Historical Contexts,” in *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 128-66; and Michael Denning, “Representing Global Labor.” *Social Text* 25, no. 3 (2007), 125-45. Denning’s essay considers the evolution of labor representations and terminology over the years.

<sup>66</sup> The scene before this one mocks this idea of efficiency in another way, with the company testing a new eating machine on The Tramp during his lunch hour. The machine is supposed to speed up the lunch hour, but it breaks, with hilarious results.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, B. Shumiatski, “Charlie Chaplin’s New Picture,” *New Masses* (24 September 1935), 29-30.

In the arena of visual arts, Rea and Burck's contemporary, leftist painter Philip Evergood, employed crude painterly techniques, gaudy colors, and strange physiognomic distortions for representing his working-class figures in nearly every work he made in the 1930s. His painting *The Siding* (1936) is fairly representative of these depictions, with a group of homely workers gathering together during their break (fig. 3.21). The socialist cartoonist Art Young was an artist working specifically in graphic satire who also used bodily distortion in his pictures of labor, as can be seen in a cartoon from *The Masses*, published in 1913, with the set of captions: "'I' gorry. I'm tired!' 'There you go! YOU'RE tired! Here I be a-standin' over a hot stove all day, an' you workin' in a nice cool sewer!'" (fig. 3.22). The image utilizes working class dialect to humorously show that the wife's unpaid labor at home over the stove is as important as her husband's job. This alone makes the drawing a suggestive commentary about work since it brings attention to modern capitalist ideology of labor as a *paid* activity performed outside the home. What is especially relevant to our discussion, though, is this man's appearance in Young's cartoon—namely his disproportionately large hands, which call attention to his identity as a manual laborer.

In his discussion of anti-capitalist satire in *The Masses*, David Holloway argues that such images can be seen as critiques of increasingly systemized modes of production that were prevalent in the period.<sup>68</sup> The growth of the factory system represented an entirely new understanding of labor and with it a re-imagination of bodily ideals. More specifically, this system broke down jobs once completed by one worker into several piecemeal tasks completed

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<sup>68</sup> Holloway, "Visualizing Dissent in World War I," 63-72.

by a team of individuals in a production line.<sup>69</sup> This system privileged the unskilled worker instead of the skilled one: ideally someone who could operate under conditions of regularity, repetition, and efficiency. Workers like Chaplin's fictional Tramp in *Modern Times* were in charge of one task that was repeated for hours at a time, ideally performed in synchronized harmony with his fellow workers, all under the command of a rhythm of the assembly line machine. Through corporeal exaggerations, Holloway argues, works like Young's call attention to the physical alienation that workers experienced within these systems.<sup>70</sup> Or more simply put, through the language of the distorted body they insist on the human presence within this system.

Notably, the focus on mechanized forms of production also reshaped human ideals more generally. The early twentieth century was marked by the development of new systems and ideologies—like eugenics and statistics—that promoted standardization, efficiency, and sameness as cultural values, as constituted in terms like the “normal” human being.<sup>71</sup> As disabilities scholar Lennard Davis writes, these ideals placed greater value on the middle class than ever before, and further bolstered bourgeois hegemony while also characterizing anyone outside of these “norms” as defective.<sup>72</sup> While the works by Young and Evergood provide pointed rebuttals to industrial systems of labor, we can also see them as challenges to these broader ideals, and to the attendant efforts in this period to stigmatize difference and even, within

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<sup>69</sup> This shift of bodily ideals is also discussed in provocative ways in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Disability, Identity, and Representation: An Introduction,” in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5-18.

<sup>70</sup> Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent in World War I,” 67.

<sup>71</sup> In her recent examination of the development of surveys (such as the Gallup Poll) and sociological case studies (such as Robert and Helen Lynd's famous Middletown case study on the citizens of Muncie, Indiana), Sarah Igo demonstrates the power of mass population studies to shape Americans' understandings of themselves as citizens. The interwar period marks the beginning of an understanding of the nation rooted in statistically based concepts of average, majority, and minority. See Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, And the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> Lennard J. Davis, “Constructing Normalcy,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 3-19.



the context of eugenics, eliminate the so-called “unfit.” Evergood’s painting is especially rich in this regard, for the workers are highly individualized autonomous figures who, I would argue, seem dignified in their activity. Evergood depicts them gathering together during their break to play cards inside a railcar that is fancifully ornate.<sup>73</sup> This whimsical touch can be seen as a celebration of their embodied singularity, as well as their experiences as workers whose bodies would be visibly marked by their physical strain.

Like these images, Rea’s cartoon also critiques modern industry, though in a somewhat different way. His figures are also deformed to demarcate the physicality of their actions, especially through their distorted body shapes. The workers in the background, especially, are defined almost wholly by their hunchback postures, represented as abstract rounded shapes. And yet unlike the figures in Evergood’s painting, which are each depicted with individualized features, Rea’s workers lack any visual references to subjectivity. Nor are they especially sympathetic types, as Young’s sewer worker is, looking pleadingly outward at the viewer. The exuberant subversive energy that bursts forth out of Chaplin’s maddened Tramp is also strikingly absent. Rather, Rea’s work can be more closely linked to a much darker image of the grotesque that found most vivid form in freak shows, a lowbrow form of entertainment that was rooted in a public fascination with human oddity.

## **FREAK AESTHETICS**

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<sup>73</sup> Evergood’s sympathy with the working class is well documented. See, for example, Kendall Taylor, *Philip Evergood: Never Separate from the Heart* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987); John I.H. Baur, *Philip Evergood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975); and Patricia Hills, “Art and Politics in the Popular Front: the Union Work and Social Realism of Philip Evergood,” in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

Although their popularity had waned since their peak in the late nineteenth-century, freak shows were still a component of Coney Island's entertainments and significantly, one of the many subjects that Rea had satirized in his cartoons at *The New Yorker*.<sup>74</sup> They also occupied public imagination through both fictional literature and the emerging horror film genre. But more importantly, they had become an important discursive site for exploring broader themes about exploitation, ideas of normalcy, constructions of community, and formations of subjectivity.<sup>75</sup>

Tod Browning's controversial horror film *Freaks* (1932) is an especially resonant work within this context. The workers in Rea's cartoon share striking similarities to the side show characters featured in the film that are popularly known as "pinheads" for their smaller than average heads and sloping foreheads. The main "pinhead" character in *Freaks* is played by sideshow actor Schlitze, whose overbite is reminiscent of the overbite of the workers in Rea's image (see fig. 3.23). So-called "pinheads" suffered a neuro-developmental disorder called microcephaly, and in addition to their unusual appearance, they had intelligence of an average child and were known for their docile demeanor. In the film, Schlitze and the other pinheads wear loose gowns and bows that vaguely feminize them, and are cared for as child-like creatures by a chaperone—represented as a maternal figure. This display practice conformed to exhibiting conventions in the 1920s and 1930s. That is to say, in sideshows, pinheads appeared as docile childlike creatures. While freak shows pushed comfort levels, this mode of exhibiting also made so-called freaks seem less threatening. *Freaks* is a movie that draws from these conventions of

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<sup>74</sup> One example of these cartoons is a satire about the Coney Island crowds, *New Yorker* (18 July 1931), 12.

<sup>75</sup> Writers and artists drawing on freaks shows to explore these themes include Carson McCullers, Nathanael West, Tod Browning, and Pavel Tchelitchev.

exhibiting, only to upend them at different points—using the context of the freak show as an effective means to interrogate viewers’ notions of normalcy.

*Freaks* focuses on the hidden world behind a carnival show, in which a group of performers that includes pinheads, but also “midgets,” “bearded ladies,” “skeleton men,” and the like, living together as a community with all the attendant social hierarchies, conflicts, and bonds that one would find in mainstream society. During much of the film, viewers simply get to know the various characters, their interests and dreams. Browning even includes a scene in which a bearded lady gives birth to a healthy child who is cared for by the larger group. Such scenes challenge viewers’ expectations: in this case in relation to different cultural constructions of gender as well as conventional notions of family.

Within this setting, a romantic plot line unfolds in which Hans, a likeable midget, is exploited by the statuesque trapeze artist Cleopatra, with whom he has hopelessly fallen in love (fig. 3.24). Because Hans is wealthy, Cleopatra pretends to return his affections, going so far as to participate in a marriage ceremony. But she explodes in disgust when at wedding banquet, the sideshow characters attempt to initiate the trapeze artist into their world by way of a ceremony that includes the cadence, “gooba gabba, we accept her, one of us” (fig. 3.25). Up to this point the movie follows melodrama conventions albeit in an unusual backdrop. Browning has built a narrative designed for viewers to find sympathy with side-show characters. In the last act, the movie shifts abruptly to conform to a horror genre. After Cleopatra’s real intentions are exposed, the performers truly become monstrous, enacting their violent revenge in the last minutes of the movie. Significantly for our discussion, the pinhead characters in the work are central to the plot of revenge. In the second-to-last scene, we see them closing in on her. In the last scene, we see Cleopatra as a “freak” herself in a cage as a monstrous creature that is part human, part chicken.

As an unresolved genre, *Freaks* teases audiences' perceptions. The first half of the movie elicits a sympathetic response, while the second half invokes the fearful titillations of the horror genre. In addition, throughout the film, Browning focuses the camera on various performers enhancing the voyeuristic experience that normally defines the spectatorial relationship of freak shows. In her study on fictional freakery, literary scholar Nancy Bombacci argues that in invoking both fascination and pity, Browning simultaneously invites and prevents viewers to see freaks as "either normal people or as seductive spectacles."<sup>76</sup> This thereby challenges viewers to consider more broadly their own modes of viewing popular forms of entertainment. In addition, Browning subverts conventions of normality in the banquet scene by turning Cleopatra into an outsider, thereby using the setting to challenge his audience to question their own relative cultural position.

The connection between Rea's work and Browning's circus-themed film is suggestive, for *Freaks*, like Rea's cartoon, has rich allegorical implications. With its allusions to outsiders and exploitation—and collective revenge—the film can also be read as a metaphor for revolutionary rebellion. But Browning also uses the subversive language of the grotesque to destabilize his viewers' perceptions in ways that assault their sensibilities. This more purposely agitating form of the grotesque also activates Rea's work. The grotesque bodies in Rea's work interrogate viewers' experiences and their relative positions within the world, forcing them to oscillate between alienation from these strange creatures and sympathy for the way they are being treated by the pair in the foreground representing the authority of the federal government. In this way, the comic grotesque in this work operates not only as a mode of expression but also as a mode of "perception." It serves to wrench viewers from familiar modes of understanding,

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<sup>76</sup> Nancy Bombacci, *Freaks in Late Modernist Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 104.

through the unstable language of the body. This is a conception of the grotesque that the well-known literary critic from the period, Kenneth Burke, defined as the “perception through incongruity”—or, in Rea’s terms, a mode of humor that makes exploitive systems seem “ludicrous.”<sup>77</sup>

Notably, through this visual language, Rea’s cartoon also exploits a number of social anxieties tied both to the social structures of the normal and the deviant in the period, and to issues of race. First, by drawing from freak show aesthetics, Rea connects the citizen within New Deal ideology to extreme outsiders in society who were objectified by those both fascinated and horrified by their existence. The evocation of the freak show played into deep anxieties about genetic error that were promoted through ideologies of “normalcy.” Not only did this imagery serve as an unsettling symbol of capitalist labor, but in the process it affiliated so-called “freaks” with ideas of mindless obedience and criminality. Even though it critiques the federal government’s injustices, within this framework this work also served to further stigmatize those whom modern society had deemed unfit.

Through its grotesque depiction, Rea’s work also conjoined themes of abnormality, freakishness, and oafishness with African Americans in the South, the primary group targeted for chain gang prison camps. Rea’s associations between African American men and “pinheads,” specifically, is especially problematic. As many of his viewers likely knew, one of the most famous “pinhead” figures in the history of sideshows was William Henry Johnson, more popularly known as Zip the Pinhead, a former slave who appeared in an exhibit P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in the 1860s (fig. 3.26). Nineteenth-century sideshows often used sensational strategies that linked bodily transgression with cultural difference, transforming the singular

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<sup>77</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 1935 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 112.

body of the outsider into a highly charged signifier for the exotic. Such was the case with Johnson, who wore a fur costume and was marketed as a human-animal hybrid—a “What is It?”—that had been purportedly discovered in the wilds of Africa. As Thomas Fahy writes of this phenomenon, as a “pinhead,” Johnson was also docile and thus even though his body was transgressive, it also appeared as a nonthreatening entity that could be easily managed.<sup>78</sup> The performative space mapped out a hierarchy of “races” in spectacular bodily terms, providing a framework for viewers to justify such institutions as slavery and colonization.

The figures in Rea’s work also appear as docile almost child-like victims, with no semblance of agency or internal struggle. Their facial features also resemble a very schematic African-American physiognomy. Such connections are suggestive though perhaps not fully intentional. As a regular contributor to *New Masses* and Communist sympathizer, Rea was ostensibly against institutional forms of racism. Not only had the Communist Party acted as a major force against chain gang abuse, but they were also one of the most vocal critics of lynching throughout these years. Yet even outside the context of Rea’s work, this issue is complicated. As Lichtenstein and others have noted, leftist critiques against these racist institutions were founded on a belief that they were similar to other social injustices that they believed to be produced within the class-based structure of capitalism. They tended to treat racism as a capitalist strategy used to divide the working class. Thus, when *Daily Worker* published Spivak’s book *Georgia Nigger*, for example, the editors added supplementary material that highlighted the chain gang abuse of black and white working class alike so as to highlight the class—rather than the racial—dimensions of chain gang abuse.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 22.

<sup>79</sup> See Lichtenstein, “Chain Gangs, Communism, and the ‘Negro Question,’” 663-58.

Notably, Rea's work is not the only one in the period to explicitly use the trope of the chain gang as a metaphor for government exploitation. Burck himself utilized this imagery in his cartoon "Roosevelt, Remember the Forgotten Man!" (21 March 1933), which includes a phrase related to the president's job relief programs on one of the balls attached to a prison worker (fig. 3.27). Though the phrase on the ball in the foreground is difficult to read, it begins with "Roosevelt's jobless..." directing viewers to see the faceless workers hammering at rocks as stand in for the federal relief workers, perhaps even the men on the CCC. In both works, the terrible injustice to black men has been recast as a convenient if provocative symbol of capitalist oppression. While the comparison is vivid, this symbolic use of the penal system minimizes the particularities of chain gang exploitation, in the process reducing the lived experiences of Southern blacks to the realm of allegory. Although with Burck's work, there is a difference: in this image, he displays the men working as physically strong figures, their bodies endowed with a certain degree of dignity. In Rea's work, by contrast, the figures become provocatively primitivized and grotesque symbols for the degradation and alienation the political Left believed workers experienced through the government's system of capitalism.

Though in some ways problematic, especially in regards to race and abnormality, Rea's work is nonetheless a multi-layered image that engages both with the particulars of the WPA program in New York, as well as with broader themes related to issues of capitalism, alienation, autonomy, and the very notion of labor within New Deal ideology. Rea exploited widespread outrage about chain gangs—as well as common held prejudices about bodily anomaly—to challenge his viewers to see the president's relief efforts through an entirely different casting of worker as a symbol of the body politic. Burck's satire of the CCC, "Roosevelt's Offer to Veterans," also raises questions about the ideology of the New Deal through his suggestive use

of disfigurement, likewise creating a vivid metaphor for the experience of labor under capitalism. But while his work can be tied to a larger artistic discourse on bodily distortions found in the works of Philip Evergood or Art Young, it also engages with a specific set of issues related specifically to physical disability.

## **DISMANTLING**

In the 1930s, physically handicapped individuals—a group that largely consisted of the war maimed, those who suffered polio, people injured at work, those with congenital diseases, or those that who endured some other kind of environmental accident—had only marginally better social status than the “freakish” figures that found work at side show acts. Like “freaks,” they were stigmatized as outsiders. But because their disfigurement had often been caused by an environmental factor, their bodies were also discomfiting reminders of the physical costs of living in a modern industrialized society with new and powerful technologies, but without the means to protect the public more fully from the dangers of disease or the attendant risks that come with industrial factory work.

Companies would typically refuse to hire disabled individuals regardless of whether their injury would affect their work, often administering tests to prove their (dis)abilities during the application process. When the New Deal programs began, it followed this precedent, excluding the handicapped from the so-called “able-bodied” public as “unemployable.” Within the field of eugenics, which was still popular in the period, they were treated far worse. In the 1910s, a movement to euthanize the disabled had emerged in an effort to prevent what Dr. Harry J. Haiselden called a “life of rejection, misery, and murderous rage” in his pro-euthanasia film *The*



*Black Stork* (1916).<sup>80</sup> One of the few ways that the disabled could manage to navigate mainstream society was if their injuries were mild enough that they could “rehabilitate” and “overcome” their disability. President Roosevelt is the best-known individual in the period to use this strategy, going through intense physical therapy after his bout with polio in the early 1920s, and by finding ways to minimize the visual markers of their bodily difference. But as disability scholars Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger point out, the success of this strategy was built on a degree of self-loathing about the disabled parts—“shouldering an enormous burden of stigma management.”<sup>81</sup>

Within this broader context, one of the most common stereotypes invoked by leftist satirists—including Burck, in his soup-line themed cartoon “The ‘American Standard’ of Living”—was the disabled as helpless victims with little agency (see fig. 3.7). More specifically, as Longmore and Goldberger note, in the 1930s “cripples,” as they were called, were typically associated with public begging.<sup>82</sup> The public beggar occupied an ambivalent space within this context. While they appeared as pathetic figures in this context, they also operated as a discomforting reminder of the failures of modern society to protect all individuals. Recognizing how unsettling the presence of the “unsightly beggar” could be to the general public, some cities, like Chicago, went so far as to ban any person who was “diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person” from public

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<sup>80</sup> As quoted in Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger, “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the new Disability History.” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 3 (December 2000), 894. Much of the historical context in this section is drawn from this study.

<sup>81</sup> Longmore and Goldberger, “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression,” 897.

<sup>82</sup> Longmore and Goldberger, “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression,” 894.

view.<sup>83</sup> When leftist artists like Burck used this trope, they were purposely challenging public sentiments.

In his particular work of the soup line, Burck invokes this stereotype only to complicate it by depicting the disabled veteran as part of a larger crowd that represent the American public, all in the same situation. Other leftist satirists drew on this stereotype to make broader claims about social inequalities. Gardner Rea, for example, also utilized the suggestive meaning of the disabled beggar in a *New Masses* cartoon captioned “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself—holding up the government for two billion dollars?” (3 February 1936), to critique the relative decadence of the wealthy profiting under the capitalist system, as represented by the man in a top hat getting out of his luxurious car to berate the veteran (fig. 3.28). Both Rea and Burck were likely also drawing from an artistic legacy in German art of depicting the war-wounded as grotesque symbols of modern alienation, as exemplified by Otto Dix’s jarring print *War Cripples* (1920) (fig. 3.29). In Dix’s image, the veterans appear as strange mechanical monsters; the artist uses references to machines to enhance a sense of fragmentation. This kind of work was well known through reproductions and exhibitions, including the major German contemporary art show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1931.<sup>84</sup> Yet unlike Dix, both Rea and Burck, in “The ‘American Standard’ of Living,” depict their war wounded in a more sympathetic light. In particular, Burck’s naturalistic style and attention to physiognomic detail endows the veteran in “The ‘American Standard’ of Living” with a sense of dignity that transcends the stigma of his

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<sup>83</sup> Law as quoted in Longmore and Goldberger, “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression,” 894.

<sup>84</sup> Dix was one of many artists engaging the grotesque whose work appeared at this exhibition. The show also included works by George Grosz, Emil Nolde, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, among others. For details on the exhibition, see Edward Alden Jewel, “Art: Contemporary German Art Shown,” *New York Times* (13 March 1931), 29.

disability. Both are also different from Dix in that they are using the disabled figure as an instrument for indicting the government for not doing enough to care for the public.

As an image depicting veteran amputees, Burck's CCC related work, "Roosevelt's Offer to Veterans," can also be tied to these ideas, though only in the broadest sense. While the broken bodies of the men would intersect with popular perceptions of the disabled as passive victims, their physical activity of cutting wood also completely subverts this stereotype of the "cripple" as feeble and helpless. The political context of the work raises a number of issues related to ideas of federal assistance, work, capitalism, and citizenship. But as figures with military uniforms that actively chop and saw wood, their bodies also become signifiers of something even more unsettling. Their actions remind viewers of the violence inflicted upon them during WWI, but also the violence they would have inflicted.

As historian Joanna Bourke has noted in her study on British WWI veterans, this more double-edged view of maimed soldiers lurked just below the surface of public discussions about the war in the 1920s.<sup>85</sup> Unlike many other disabled men and women, veterans stood out in society as youthful, strong, and muscular types whose bodies were aggressively and abruptly disfigured. Their bodies became unstable signifiers of mutilator and mutilated for the public. Much as the anti-war artists had a generation earlier, Burck seems to be exploiting this double-edged symbolism, reminding his viewers in the process that the government not only caused their wounds, but also used them as agents of destruction.

In this respect, Burck's work also shares certain qualities with a smaller set of cultural works that exploit the active disfiguring of the human body as a symbol of modern age, using the act of violence itself to register the destructive effect of capitalist America on the human spirit.

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<sup>85</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), 37-38.

Burck's work can be connected in an especially rich way to one of the first works of fiction by novelist Nathanael West, *A Cool Million* (1934): a darkly satirical novel that takes up the idea of "dismantling," as West called it, as the central symbol of capitalism in the 1930s. West's narrative centers not on veterans but on a young man named "Lemuel Pitkin," who is modeled after the protagonists in the Horatio Algers rags-to-riches novels that were popular in the Gilded Age. West completely subverts the Algers formula, however, by showing the beaten down at every turn in his quest to make money.

The novel begins with Pitkin as a poor young man living with his mother, a widow, in a small town in Vermont. Upon learning that the bank has foreclosed on his mother's home, "our hero," as West characterizes him, decides to head to big city of New York to attempt to make enough money to save the home. Financially aided by a mysterious man named Nathan Whipple, he takes one of the first trains out of town. On board, he faces what becomes the first of many obstacles when he is pick-pocketed. Throughout, West's creates scenarios that prove cruelly abusive to Pitkin, and in this first episode, he not only loses his money but is also mistaken as the thief. He is thrown into jail, and is only released months later after enduring a strange punishment: his teeth are removed so that they do not succumb to teeth-rot. At the jail, he sees Whipple again, who himself has been imprisoned for an underhanded financial deal, and is encouraged, once again to head to New York. Undeterred, Pitkin continues on his quest, only to be physically tortured once again upon his arrival: this time losing an eye when a horse accidentally kicks him.

As the plot continues to unfold, Pitkin's injuries continue to get worse. By the end, he is crippled, missing a finger, his eye, his teeth; in a mishap with a Native American chief, he has also been scalped. West exploits the grotesque symbolism of freaks: towards the end of the novel

Pitkin appears as a performer in a sideshow act. The story finally ends when he is killed in an assassination attempt on his friend Whipple, who had by this point become the leader of a political party known as the “Leatherstockings,” a racist group whose ideology was close to fascism. Only in his death is Pitkin celebrated—as the martyr for Whipple’s fascist cause.

Throughout, West laces these macabre events with a dark humorous sensibility, repeatedly characterizing Pitkin as a naive country boy and eternal optimist who trudges on. Within this context, the dismantling of his body becomes the embodied expression of the systemic exploitation of the worker under capitalism. On these terms alone, the work shares a provocative set of themes with Burck’s satire, which takes up the veterans’ ongoing disenfranchisement as an emblem for the same system of exploitation. Both push against myths of the “American Dream”—as embodied in the Horatio Alger myths, for West—and as represented in the optimistic rhetoric of the CCC, for Burck—with aggressively violent representations of disfigurement. In this respect, they are also highly incendiary as visions of American society specifically countering New Deal rhetoric, with its evocations of growth, recovery, and a strong body politic.

This is especially suggestive when we focus more closely on Roosevelt’s role within this New Deal discourse, not only as the leader of the recovery efforts but as the embodied symbol of health and rehabilitation himself. Longmore and Goldberger, Susan Currell, and Sally Stein all argue that the President used and allowed others to use his rehabilitation efforts as an embodied expression of his fitness for the presidency at a time of great national need, carefully managing his personal narrative in ways that would “display him as an indomitable victor over personal

adversity.”<sup>86</sup> This personal narrative, writes Currell, became a rhetorical counter point to the “forgotten man at the bottom of the pyramid”—a political model in embodied personal terms for the ability of the nation and its people to transform themselves through hard work. In a 1932 essay in *Physical Culture*, for example, author Earle Looker described the president’s fortitude and devotion to his nation in embodied ways: “His impatience brought him back into public life when everyone said he was physically finished. It has accomplished a great deal for himself and more for others. How will he direct this powerful trait?”<sup>87</sup> As Stein notes, the success of this political rhetoric depended not only on the cooperation of the press and his staff, but also on a public “that desperately wanted to believe in miraculous recoveries in troubled times.”<sup>88</sup> Both Burck and West undermine the ideology of this recovery rhetoric with their insistently grotesque portrayals of America during the Depression as a capitalist society that dehumanizes its public.

Part of what makes West’s work so disturbing is Pitkin’s naivety and utter lack of self-consciousness. Pitkin is not only easily manipulated by malevolent forces; one of the main characters who encourages him to keep seeking out his own fortune is the fascist political figure Whipple. Significantly, Pitkin has no comprehension of Whipple’s political ideology: he only sees him as an elder figure he respects and admires for his seeming willingness to help him out. West threads his critique of American capitalism with an even darker allegorical subtext about complacency and the threat of home grown fascism.

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<sup>86</sup> Longmore and Golberger, “The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression,” 897. See also Susan Currell, “Eugenic Decline and Recovery in Self-Improvement Literature of the 1930s,” in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. Susan Currell and Christina Codgell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 44-69; and Sally Stein, “The President’s Two Bodies: Stagings and Restagings of FDR and the New Deal Body Politic,” *American Art* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 32-57.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Currell, “Eugenic Decline and Recovery,” 46.

<sup>88</sup> Stein, “The Presidents Two Bodies,” 36.

While Burck is focused more on the overreach of the government than on the threat of an outsider figure like the fictional Whipple, his work also explores similar themes. Viewers of the work would have readily connected his critique of the government to earlier indictments of the U.S. during WWI, when it used conscription to force its citizens to fight in what political radicals believed was an imperial war created to support and forward industrialized capitalism. His work shares rich similarities to Robert Minor's political satire "The Perfect Soldier," published in *The Masses* in 1917 (see fig. 1.1). Like Burck, Minor used a disfigured body. The brawny headless man acts as a pointed symbol of the "ideal" citizen—and mindless strong body that could be used for war, or by extension, as Holloway argues in his discussion of *The Masses*, in the service of advancing industrialized capitalism.

Both "Roosevelt's Offer to Veterans," by Burck, and "When Do They Stop and Sing?," by Rea, act as scathing critiques of the government. Both also challenge viewers through their provocative portrayals of political citizenship, disfigured and deformed under capitalism. These two works turn the elements of the grotesque as a means to rally their viewers around anti-New Deal protests, but also to raise broader questions about the value of the working class body in the U.S. in the period. But Burck's critique also alludes to something far more unsettling: it links the government's programs to a history of coercion through the charged symbolism of the maimed WWI veteran. In the second half of the 1930s, the radical left would continue to be concerned with the powers of the state. But increasingly, after the development of the Popular Front, these works would deal with the threat of fascism that Nathanael West had explored in *A Cool Million*. As this political movement grew, the comic grotesque would become a rich if also problematic means not only to visualize the effects of homegrown fascism, but as the next chapter explores, the ideology of fascism abroad.

CHAPTER THREE FIGURES



Figure 3.1: Jacob Burck, "Roosevelt's Offer to Veterans," *Daily Worker* (13 May 1933).



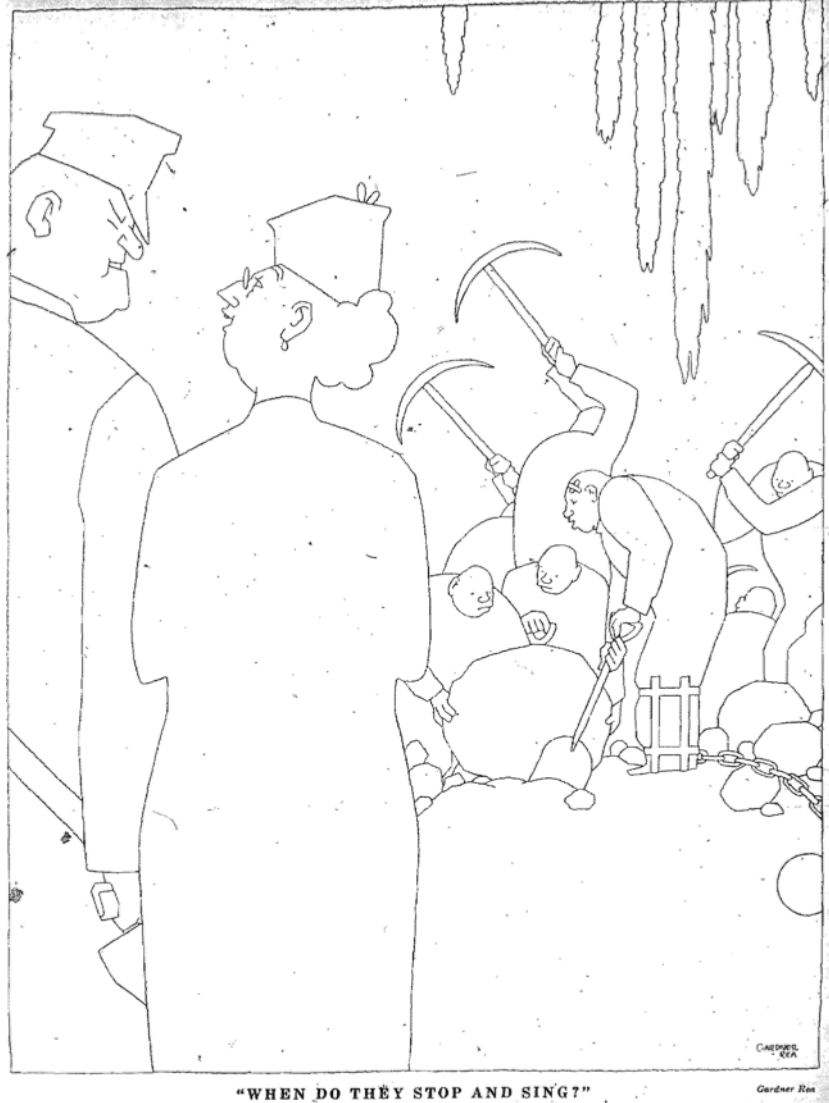


Figure 3.2: Gardner Rea, "When Do they Stop and Sing?," *New Masses* (17 September 1935).



Figure 3.3: Photo of General Hugh S. Johnson appearing as a witness before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, n.d., Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



Figure 3.4: Albert Bender, Poster from Civilian Conservation Corps, Illinois WPA Art Project, n.d.



Figure 3.5: Harry Rossell, Poster, "Spirit of CCC," 1938.



Figure 3.6: Boardman Robinson, "Europe 1916," *Masses* (1916).

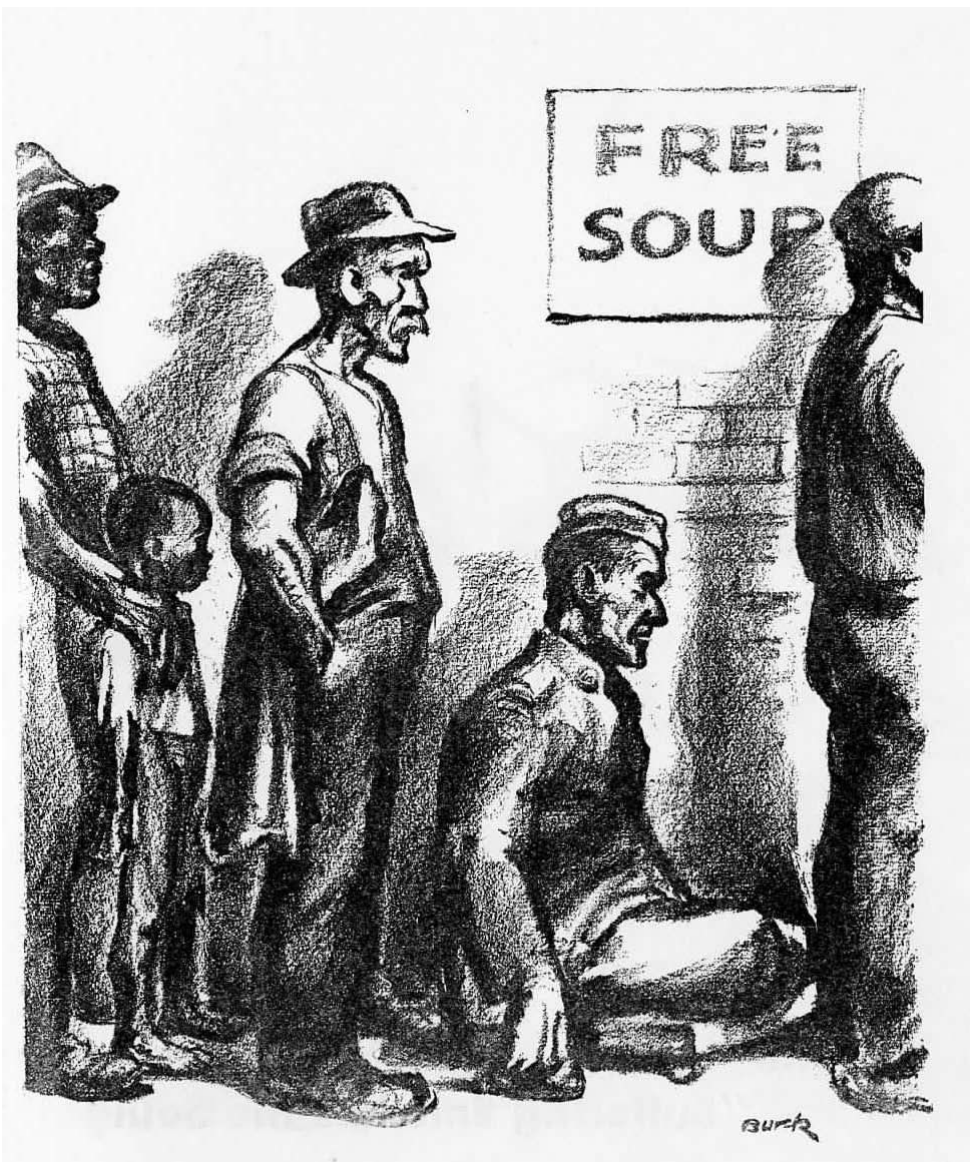


Figure 3.7: The 'American Standard of Living,'" in *Hunger and Revolt*, 1935.

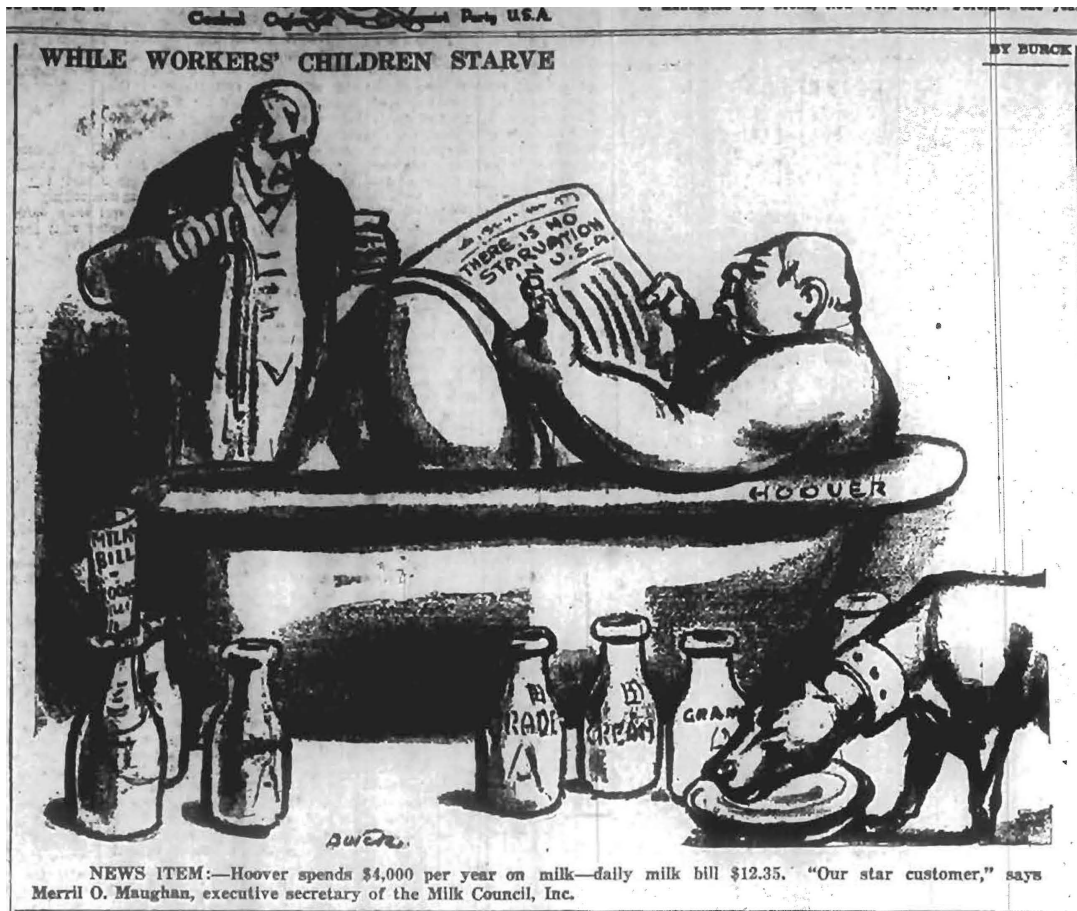
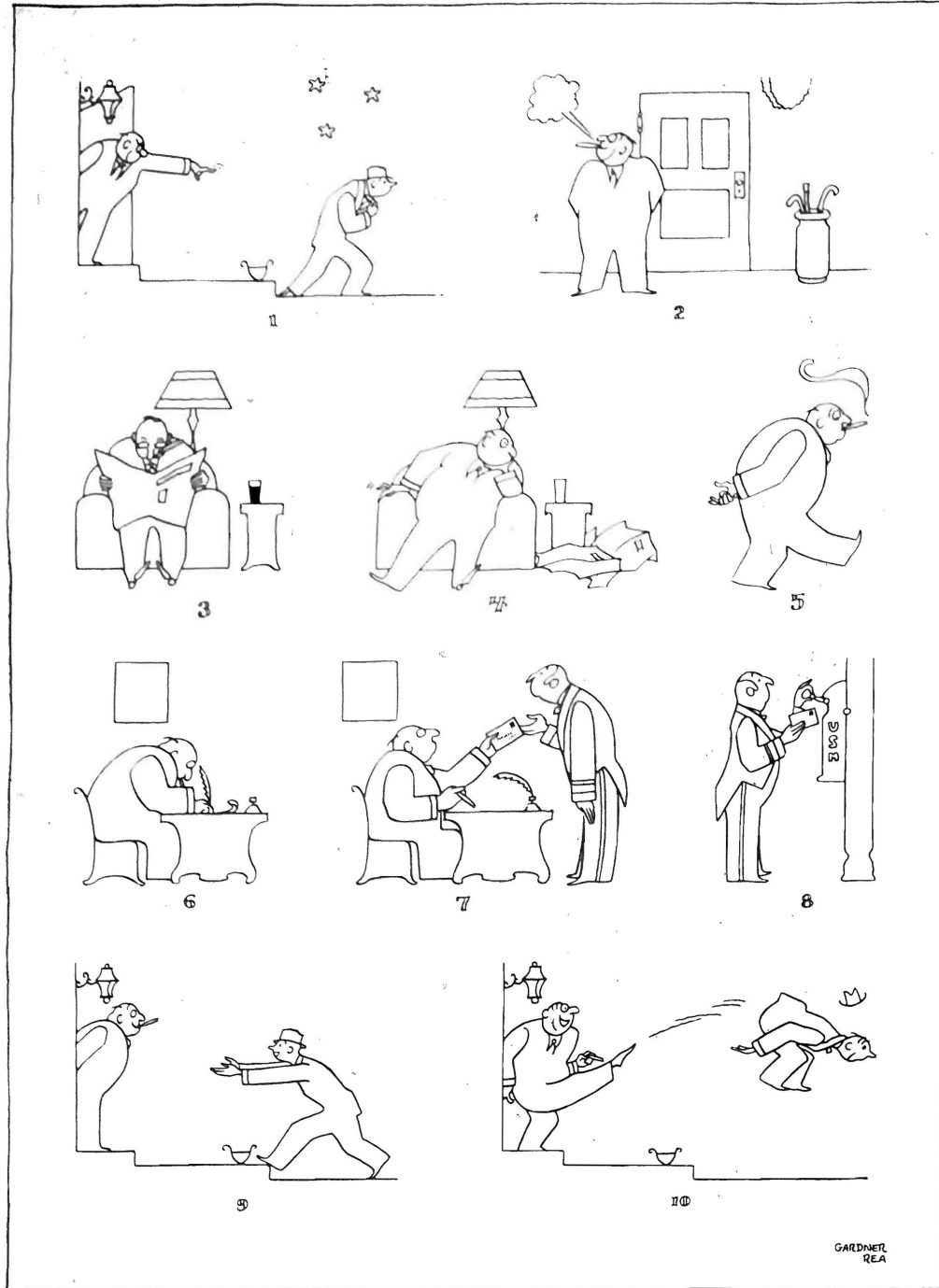
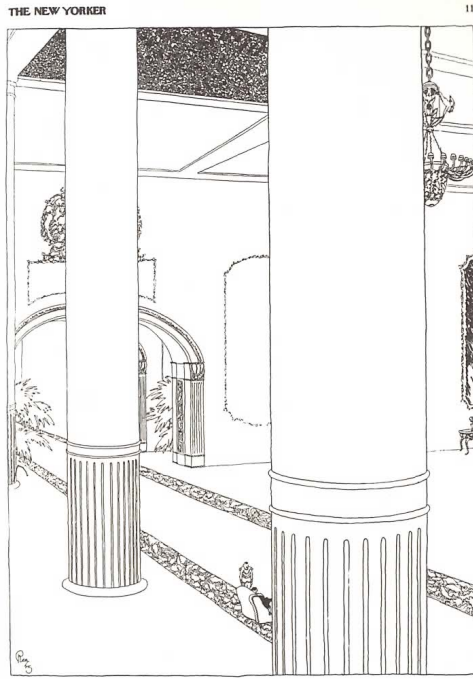


Figure 3.8: Jacob Burck, "While Workers' Children Starve," *Daily Worker* (23 March 1932).



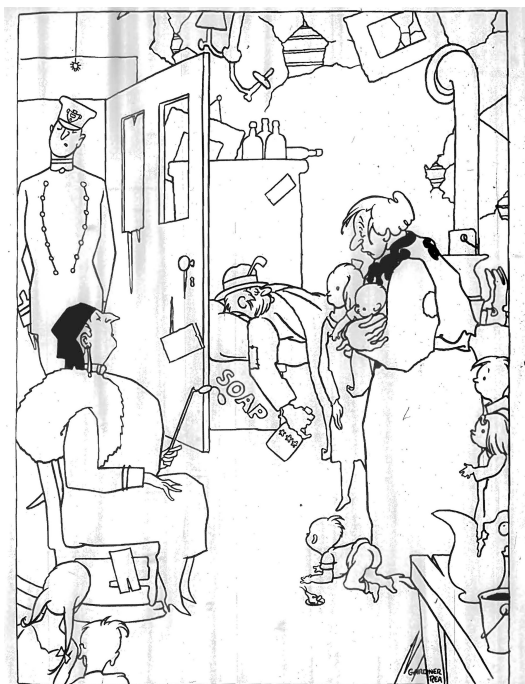
SECOND THOUGHT OF A HARD-HEARTED PARENT

Figure 3.9: Gardner Rea, "Second Thought of a Hard-Hearted Parent," *The New Yorker* (6 June 1931).



"My Man, There's a Fly in the Room"

Figure 3.10: Gardner Rea, "My Man, There's a Fly in the Room," *The New Yorker* (27 June 1925).



"Have you tried numerology?"

Figure 3.11: "Have You Tried Numerology?," *The New Yorker* (8 March 1930).

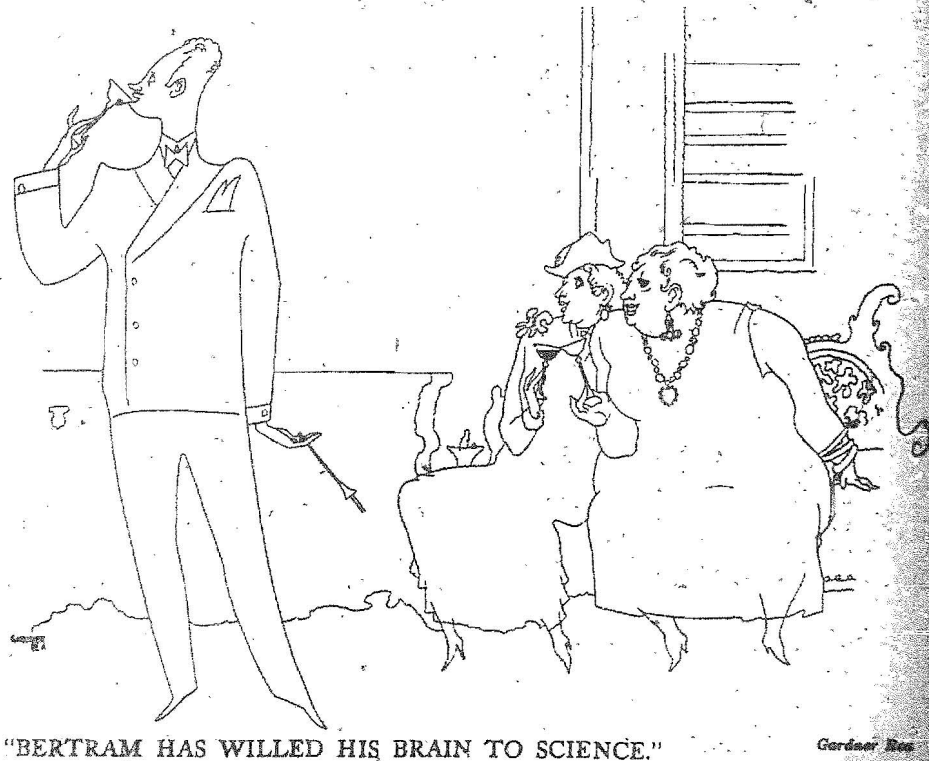


As for me, if the revolution comes I shall simply ignore it.

Gardner Rea

Figure 3.12: Gardner Rea, "As for me, if the Revolution Comes I shall Simply Ignore it," *New Masses* (20 August 1935).





"BERTRAM HAS WILLED HIS BRAIN TO SCIENCE."

Gardner Rea

Figure 3.13. Gardner Rea, "Bertram has Willed his Brain to Science" *New Masses* (27 March 1934).



"HAVE YOU CONSULTED A SPECIALIST?"

Gardner Rea

Figure 3.14: "Have You Consulted a Specialist?" *New Masses* (12 June 1934).

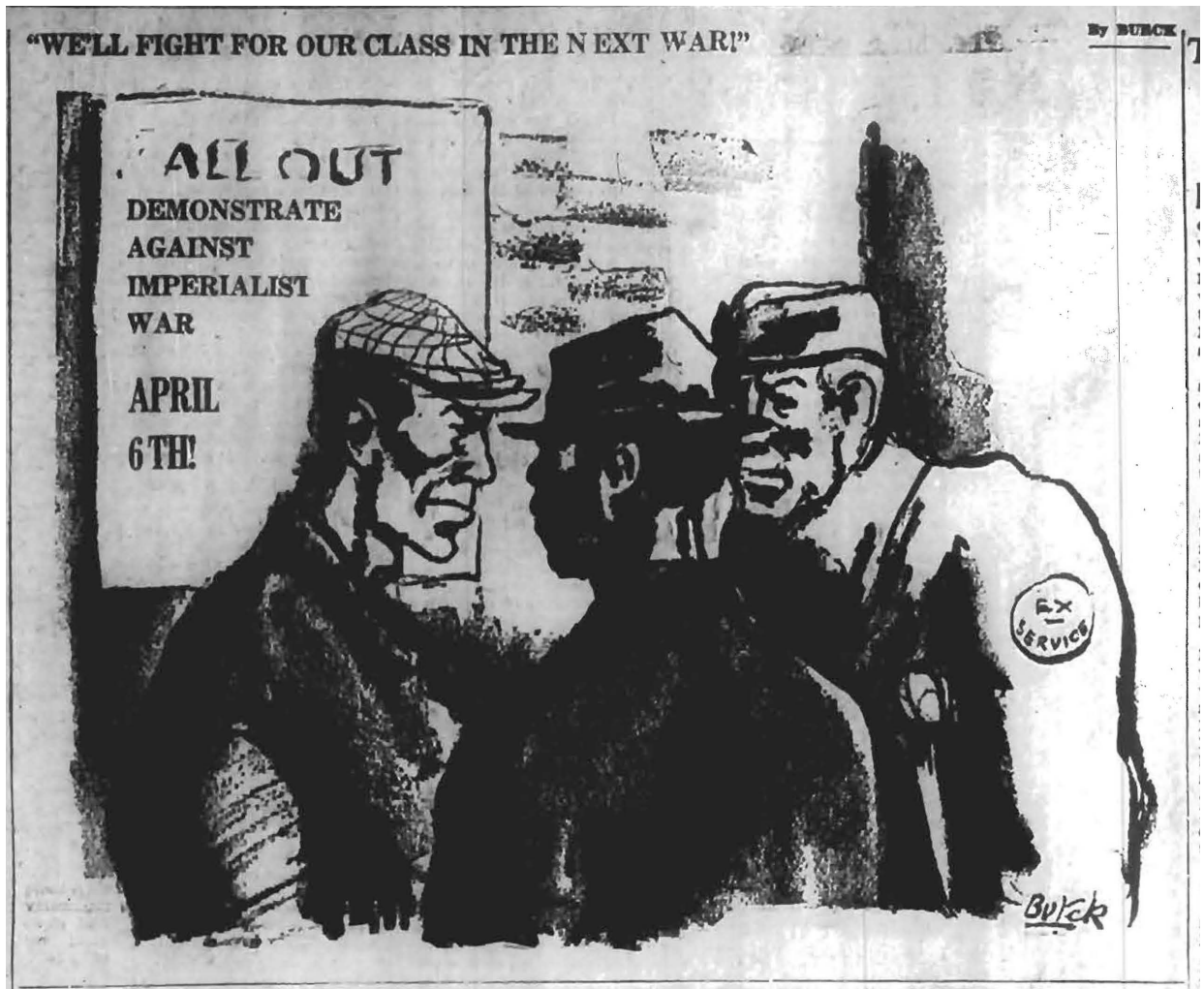


Figure 3.15: Jacob Burck, "We'll Fight for Our Class in the Next War," *Daily Worker* (4 April 1932).

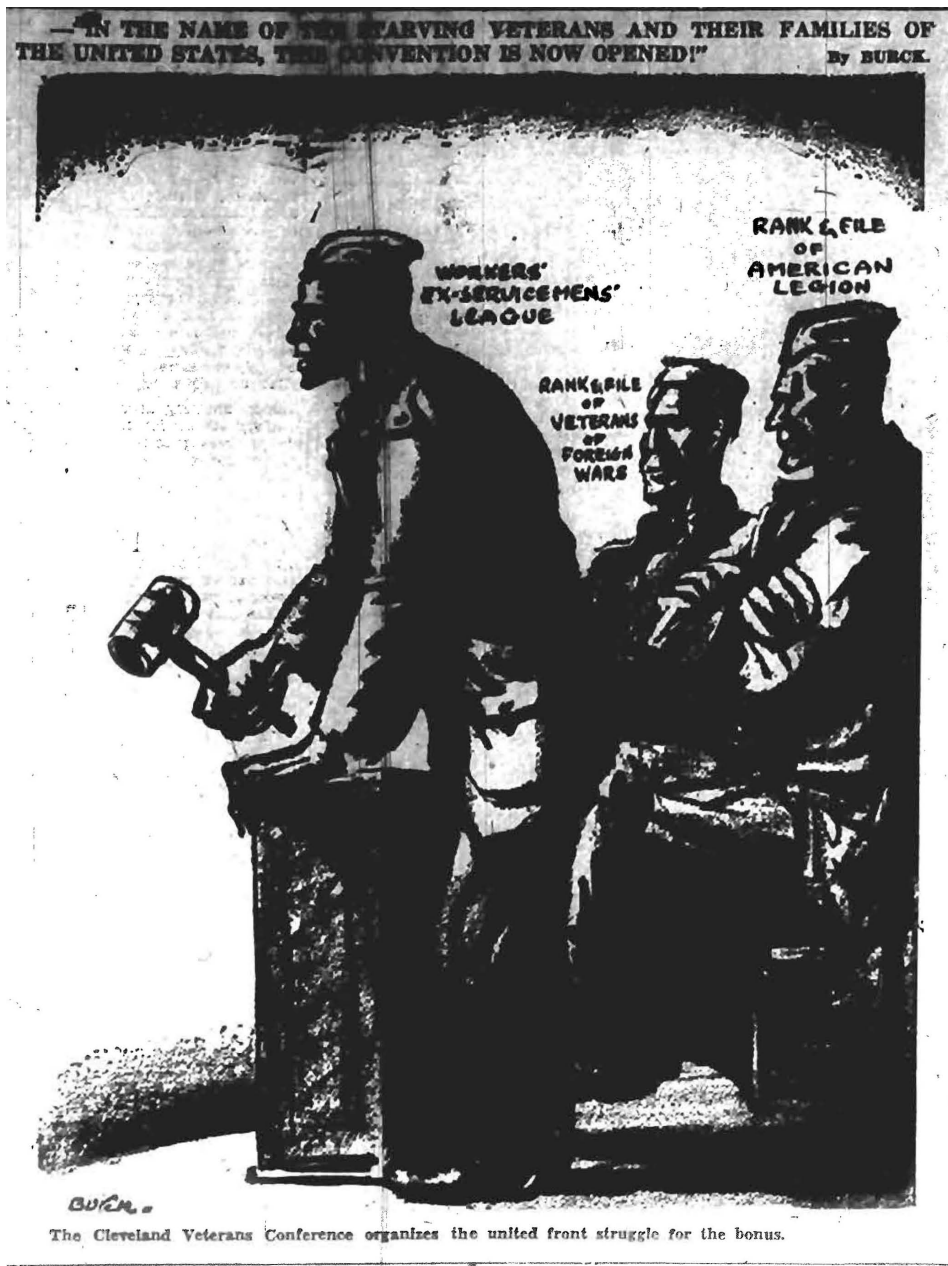


Figure 3.16: Jacob Burck, Untitled Illustration, *Daily Worker* (22 September 1932).

of tobacco; and wired Washington that if we could not be given amnesty, to revise our sentences sharply downward. Only upon his sending that wire did the committee agree to advise the prisoners to end the strike.

In those days the Commandant's proud shoulders sagged and his face wrinkled with humiliation. He had boasted of the iron discipline with which he governed the prison. But the prisoners, general and political, held their heads high and filled the entire prison with song:

"Arise ye prisoners of starvation,  
"Arise ye wretched of the earth..."

Amnesty we did not receive, but revised sentences virtually amounted to that.

It was during those days that Charles, watching the once patriotic prisoners singing the Internationale, said almost wistfully: "Think what we might have done in the army!"

Our achievement in prison was on the whole unrelated to the revolutionary struggle against imperialism. Logically so. Like those who had gone to Mexico, we had made the mistake of cutting ourselves off from the masses. Had there been a militant revolutionary leadership among the discontented American troops in Siberia and in Archangel, the results, if not decisive, might at least have marked a milestone in American revolutionary history.

In the next war the writer, for one, will not err by putting a thick prison wall between himself and the masses. Conscripted, he will be in the army. In the army, he will do his part, however small, to turn the guns of his fellow-soldiers away from one another and against their officers, to overthrow this capitalist government, and to establish a Communist Republic in these United States.

## You Fight — We Eat

WILLIAM GROPPER



You Buddies went to the front. You were loaded up with tin cans on your heads. Artillery up to your necks, blankets on your backs to fight for democracy.



Senators, preachers, politicians and the fat boys from both houses were shouting "Hurray" and belching hot-air.



While you and your buddies went to get your heads blown off—



And the food! and cookies!—Yes, and where were the generals and colonels?



And the millionaires, captains of industry back home, who were cleaning-up, making munitions, packing stinking food? Yes, for the "boys over there."



After the war— You who came back heroes—looking for a job—Yes, and what did ya get?



Many of you buddies, have to pick your food, and it ain't because you're particular.



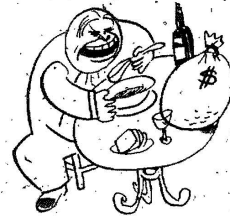
"Home Sweet Home" is sweet music to the fat babies who have plenty. What does it mean to a lot of you buddies?



And when you, heroes, who won the war, and made this World safe for Democracy, go down to Washington to ask for your Bonus—What do you get?



Those Senators, preachers, politicians and the fat boys from both houses who were shouting "Hurray" and belching hot-air—they give you the same crap.



And the Millionaires, Captains of Industry, why should they worry for you, they're not starving!  
**THE WAR IS NOT OVER, BOYS.**

Figure 3.17. William Gropper, "You Fight We Eat," *New Masses* (July 1932).



To Ralph Stoll.  
With good wishes and  
personal regards.  
The Pentagon.  
1-7-50  
Anna M. Rosenberg.

Figure 3.18: Photo of Anna M. Rosenberg, from Truman S. Library Archives, 1953.



Figure 3.19: Photo of Eleanor Roosevelt, 1930s.



Figure 3.20: Still from *Modern Times*, with Charlie Chaplin, 1935.



Figure 3.21: Philip Evergood, *The Siding*, oil on canvas, 36 x 27 inches, 1936.



Figure 3.22: Art Young, “I’ gorry. I’m tired!’ ‘There you go! YOU’RE tired! Here I be a-standin’ over a hot stove all day, an’ you workin’ in a nice cool sewer!,” *The Masses* (May 1913).



Figure 3.23: Film still photo of Schlitz, in *Freaks*, directed by Tod Browning, 1932



Figure 3.24: Film Still from *Freaks*, directed by Tod Browning, 1932.



Figure 3.25: Film Still from *Freaks*, directed by Tod Browning, 1932.





Figure 3.26: "Zip the Pinhead" William Henry Johnson, c. 1850s(?).



Figure 3.27: Jacob Burck, "Roosevelt, Remember the Forgotten Man!" *Daily Worker* (21 March 1933).

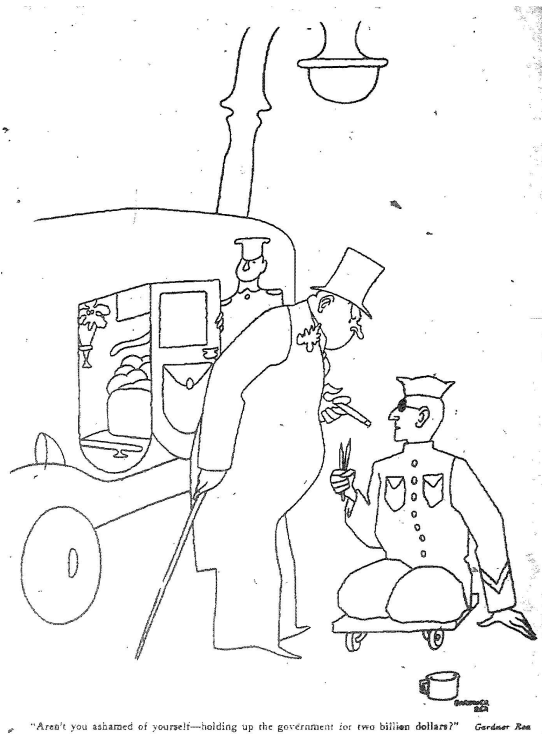


Figure 3.28: Gardner Rea, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself—holding up the government for two billion dollars?" *New Masses* (3 February 1936).



Figure 3.29: Otto Dix, *War Cripples*, drypoint, 12 3/4 x 19 9/16 inches, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1920.

## Chapter Four

### DEFILING A DIVINITY: GROPPER AND ANTI-JAPANESE SATIRE

As seen in the previous two chapters, during the Great Depression the comic grotesque was an effective strategy for troubling the very basis of predominant ideologies founded on ideals of progress. In this chapter, through an examination of William Gropper's caricature "Japanese Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize," I consider the complexities of the use of the comic grotesque as a political weapon against an enemy abroad (fig. 4.1). More specifically, this chapter uses Gropper's image as the basis for a broader examination of anti-fascist satire against Japan during the Depression. "Japanese Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize" is notable within the history of American art as one of the earliest works to take up Emperor Hirohito as the subject of its critique. Even more significantly, this work is also one of the most controversial satires of the period. When it appeared in the Condé Nast periodical *Vanity Fair* (1913-36) in August 1935 the image caught the attention of the Japanese government, which promptly censored the magazine in their country and insisted that the U.S. State Department and the magazine apologize for the image.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars of American art often highlight the impact of this satire in their discussion of anti-fascist art and activism, neither the context of the controversy nor the details of the image itself have received attention.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The incident was widely covered in the press and was so controversial to that the Japanese government also decided to censor the *New York Times* for its coverage of the incident. For more on the original censorship incident, see "Japan to Protest New York Cartoon," *New York Times* (4 August 1935), 1, 25; "Regret Expressed to Japan by Hull," *New York Times* (6 August 1935), 11; "Vanity Fair Regretful: Writes Japan's Envoy of Sorrow over Misunderstanding," *New York Times* (9 August 1935), 19; "The Nation," *New York Times* (11 August 1935), E1; "Tintype of Divinity," *Time* 26, no 7 (12 August 1935), 22; Herman Baron, *Gropper* (New York: ACA Gallery, 1938). For more on the censorship of the *New York Times*, see "Japan Likely to Bar Copies of the Times," *New Time Times* (20 September 1935), 9.

<sup>2</sup> A number of scholars have praised the work without examining it in more detail. See, for example, Louis Lozowick, *William Gropper* (Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1981), 33. Lozowick, a friend of Gropper's, died before this work was published. See also Cécile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*

Numerous aspects of the work raise larger questions, both in relation to the controversy surrounding the work specifically, and in relationship to Gropper, a Communist sympathizer with an established reputation for his incendiary anti-capitalist cartoons.<sup>3</sup> First, the published context of the image is unusual considering the artist's background and the satire's ostensible subject. As a leftist artist, Gropper was far more at home at *New Masses* than *Vanity Fair*, a magazine with an international circulation of about 90,000 globally that was best known for its celebrity gossip and celebrity caricature, reports on fashion, and discussions of modern art.<sup>4</sup> An artist with a Jewish working class background, he also contributed regularly in the period to *Daily Worker* and the Yiddish leftist workers paper *Freiheit* (1922-28).<sup>5</sup> *Vanity Fair* had been designed to appeal to middle-to-upper class urbanites as well as those with fantasies of upward mobility—the very opposite of the readers that Gropper usually engaged.<sup>6</sup> However, even though

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(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14-15; and Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 139. For a broader discussion of anti-fascist art, see also Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 167-203; and Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, ed. *Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Jacob Burck, who is discussed in Chapter Three, Gropper never became a member of the Communist Party, even though he often expressed sympathy for the cause.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that it did not cover world events as well. However, even when it did, the given article tended to avoid making a specific stance, and much of the coverage was cheeky in tone. The magazine was published across Europe and Asia, and was popular enough in China to inspire plagiarized versions of its caricature series, "Impossible Interview," in the *Shanghai Miscellany*. For a discussion of the pirated work, see "Editor's Uneasy Chair" *Vanity Fair* (February 1935), 9. For more on its circulation numbers, see "Vanity Fair Merged with Vogue by Nast," *New York Times* (30 December 1935), 21.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the Yiddish paper *Freiheit* and Gropper's engagement with Jewish themes, see Patricia Phagan, "William Gropper and *Freiheit*: A Study of his Political Cartoons, 1924-1935" (New York: CUNY, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Much of my discussion about the published context of *Vanity Fair* derives from a close examination of the magazine's entire run, in facsimile, at the University of Kansas Library, Lawrence, Kansas; for a discussion of *Vanity Fair*'s owner, Condé Nast, see Caroline Seebohm, *The Man Who Was Vogue: The Life and Times of Condé Nast* (New York: Viking, 1982); for a discussion of its chief editor Frank Crowninshield, see Geoffrey Hellman, "That was New York: Crowninshield," *The New Yorker* (14 February 1948), 74-80; for an insider perspective from a magazine employee, see Helen Lawrenson, *Stranger at the Party* (New York: Random House, 1975). For general overview of the magazine, see George Douglas, *The Smart Magazines: 50 Years of Literary Revelry and High Jinks at Vanity Fair, the*

the artist published consistently for the leftist press—and demonstrated his support for leftist ideals through participation in labor strikes and membership in the anti-fascist organization, the Artists Congress—he also contributed to commercial publications in order to supplement his income.<sup>7</sup> “Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize” was one such commission. The work was part of a larger full-page work on the theme of absurdity, *Not On Your Tintype*, which also featured four other notable contemporary figures in ridiculous situations (fig. 4.2). Notably, the satire that caused so much ire abroad was less than a quarter of page; stylistically, it was similar to the other images.<sup>8</sup>

But the work about Emperor Hirohito differed from the other caricatures in a key way: it caricatured not just any public figure, but a man considered the equivalent of a god in his country. His subjects revered him as a deity believed to be the direct ancestor of the Shinto Sun Goddess who had granted the Japanese people their land.<sup>9</sup> Within Japanese fascist ideology, he also had become a potent symbol of the country’s self-image and illustrious history upon which

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*New Yorker*, *Life*, *Esquire*, and *the Smart Set* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1991); for a discussion of the caricature in the magazine, see Wendy Wick Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature in America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on his cartooning career in a much later interview, Gropper complained about the lack of compensation from *New Masses*, in particular; see Bruce Hooton, Transcripts, *Tape Recorded Interview with William Gropper* (12 June 1965), Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Although it may seem strange to think of a Communist sympathizer working for a commercial magazine, this was not unusual. Other politically radical artists working in a similar vein included Art Young, Gardner Rea (see Chapter Three), Adolf Dehn, Mabel Dwight, and Otto Soglow.

<sup>8</sup> The subjects of the other four caricatures, which will be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter, included banker J.P. Morgan, Jr., as an anti-capitalist orator; populist Louisiana Senator Huey Long entering a monastery; conservative newspaper magnate William Hearst acting as ambassador to Communist Russia; and arctic explorer Admiral Richard E. Byrd vacationing in Tahiti.

<sup>9</sup> The emperor’s body thus represented both the country and its ancestry and traditions going back to the seventh century BCE, and as such the emperor was also a symbol of stability within a country marked by upheaval over its long history. Discussion of Emperor Hirohito can be found in numerous primary and secondary sources; these include Marion May Dilts, ““Honorable Ancestors’ who Sway Japan: Her Attitude Toward Manchuria is Colored by the Wish to Live up to a Spirit Deemed glorious in the Past,” *New York Times* (4 April 1933), 7, 16; Upton Close, “What We Don’t Know About Japan,” *Vanity Fair* (February 1935), 13-15; and Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001).

the country crafted its aggressive imperialist militarism, evidenced most prominently by their attack on Manchuria in 1933. The very fact that Japan held him to such a high regard made him a particularly rich subject for broader critique.

Gropper used several techniques within this absurd scene to make direct allusions to Japanese recent military aggressions. The work depicts Emperor Hirohito pulling an oversized cart with a beribboned scroll inside of it. Although the caption suggests the work is a peace prize, because of its size and shape it also resembles a military cannon. Hirohito's uniform secures the link between the emperor and its country's militaristic reputation. That he is so diminutive—and awkwardly stunted in proportions at that—gives the work a more subversive edge. His actions are also blasphemous, since technically he is performing a task usually relegated in his own country to coolie laborers. For the Japanese, notably, this linkage was the most offensive part of the attack.<sup>10</sup> The political critique hinges on the viewer's ability to make all of the highly charged associations and to recognize the absurdity of the caption.

Yet noticeably, the work is also pictorially subtle. Structurally, the image operates primarily through the sly use of absurdity, through clever visual puns, and suggestive innuendos. Its tone is irreverent to be sure, but also more witty than outwardly abrasive, and strikingly, all of it rendered in a stylized aesthetic. Consider, for example, how Gropper's satire differs from one of Arthur Szyk's better-known caricatures of Japanese soldiers published during World War II (fig. 4.3). While Szyk exaggerates the ears and teeth in his caricature, visually associating the figure with simians, Gropper's depiction of the emperor's visage is fairly accurate, replete with his diminutive chin, rounded spectacles and characteristic bouffant. Gropper's primary distortions of the sovereign occur in the body through a cubist language of geometric

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<sup>10</sup> The government stated, "a representation of the Emperor as engaged in a menial task of pulling a cart could not be understood or taken lightly." See "Japanese to Protest New York Cartoon," 1.

abstractions that represent his torso and limbs as a series of blocks. Yet while distorted, this body lacks the obvious bestial associations depicted in the face, stance, and oversized feet and hands of Szyk's abrasive work.

If we consider these different components, exploring the structure of the work as much as the subject—and attending to the temporal and published context as much as the artist's point of view—a reading still rooted in issues of anti-fascist activism, yet also more nuanced and multidimensional, emerges. The stylistic subtleties in the work, I will argue, have very much to do with the nature of the commission. Gropper and the *Vanity Fair's* editor Frank Crowninshield, who had both hired Gropper and conceived of the larger page of caricatures, saw the work on different terms. Gropper, I will show, viewed political caricature as a form that could be used to provoke, engage, and engender somatic empathy, which Crowninshield treated caricature as a playful cerebral exercise best admired from a privileged and analytical distance. For Crowninshield, I argue, this particular work was never meant to offend, but instead was thought of as a playful if irreverent take on well-known personalities. But offend it did in a number of ways that I will examine more fully, related to issues of militarism, Japanese structures of power, and Japan's ideology of imperialistic fascism. In this respect, I position this work as sly attack on Japanese fascism. Gropper navigated the commission to maximum effect using elements that we might not today see as related to the comic grotesque, but that in Japanese culture would have been of great offense.<sup>11</sup>

“Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize,” I also suggest, should be seen as part of a larger body of anti-Japanese works by Gropper that have never been considered in relationship to this

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<sup>11</sup> As I discuss later in the chapter, it is not clear whether Gropper anticipated that a Japanese audience would see his work. Nonetheless, Gropper made a work designed to be agitating. Moreover, it is worth noting that he was very pleased when the work caused furor. Gropper made several works after this series in direct response to the controversy.

image but demonstrate a sustained attack on fascist ideology from a Communist-informed leftist perspective. In many of these works, which appeared in leftist magazines—where Gropper’s Communist sympathies were more fully appreciated and embraced—we see more blunt expressions of the comic grotesque. A closer look at the differences between these works allows us to consider the relationship between the published context and the works themselves more fully. Notably, many of the works draw upon racial elements that serve to demonize Japan in monstrously grotesque terms. These raise important questions about the racial dynamics underlying proletarian activism in the U.S. in the early twentieth century, when immigration from Asia and Europe was affecting working-class demographics, as I discuss throughout. But first, in order to explore these works more fully, we must take a closer look at Gropper himself.

## INTRODUCING GROPPER

For Gropper, the comic grotesque was one of the most vital means of engaging the broader masses. Throughout his cartooning career he exploited the use of caricatured bodies—sometimes stunted, other times exaggerated to the extreme—to give his political message vivid and memorable form. Gropper began his career at the age of twenty at the *New York Tribune* in 1917.<sup>12</sup> By the end of 1918, he had begun what would turn into a regular post at the newly founded socialist monthly *The Liberator*; this position marked the beginning of his career as a leftist cartoonist that would include stints at numerous publications over the years, including *New*

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<sup>12</sup> For more on these very early works, see Patricia Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*,” especially Chapter Two. Phagan’s dissertation is an indispensable resource for understanding Gropper’s early cartooning activity in general. For more on his Jewish background, see Samantha Baskin, “William Gropper,” in *Encyclopedia of Jewish American Artists* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2007).



*Masses*, *Freiheit*, as well as *Vanity Fair*.<sup>13</sup> A strong sense of line, combined with what Milton Brown characterized a “mordant wit,” became a central feature of his early images, as evidenced in two of his earliest *Liberator* cartoons, “Law and Order” and “Rounding up the Reds,” both from the 1920s (figs. 4.4 and 4.5).<sup>14</sup> These works, which both serve as critiques to the “Red Scare” that dominated concerns by leftists after WWI, show Gropper’s early use of proportional exaggeration, bodily distortion, and displays of brute physical violence to visualize injustice and exploitation. Throughout the 1920s, he applied this provocative language to hundreds of topical satires for politically leftist and mainstream periodicals, all the while developing a strong sense of leftist consciousness through his socialist party membership and his participation in labor strikes. Gropper later characterized his art from this period as expressions of the “life in which we live, with the joy and sorrow, the injustices, greed, racial hatred, persecution of minorities, ignorance.”<sup>15</sup>

Gropper’s political views and approach to cartooning were both shaped by his own working class background growing up the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who lived in New York’s Lower East Side and worked in sweatshops in the garment district.<sup>16</sup> His parents’ economic struggles activated his sense of social consciousness from early on. But he was also deeply influenced by Ashcan artists Robert Henri and George Bellows, with whom he trained while a teenager at the Ferrer School, an experimental center for radical intellectual development located in East Harlem. There, he also met some of the period’s most prominent political cartoonists, many of whom worked for the radical monthly *The Masses*, and some who later

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<sup>13</sup> Gropper also worked on a broad range of politically liberal and mainstream magazines as well, including *Bookman* and *The Nation*.

<sup>14</sup> Milton Brown, “Forward,” in Lozowick, *William Gropper*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> William Gropper, Statement in *One Hundred American Jewish Artists* (1947), 72.

<sup>16</sup> For a longer discussion of his childhood see Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*,” 21-35; Lozowick, *William Gropper*, 14-20.

became Gropper's colleagues at *Liberator* and *New Masses*. During his classes with Bellows and Henri, Gropper learned what he later called the necessity of "prejudice"—that "you've got to have something to say, and say with conviction" for your art to be meaningful.<sup>17</sup> Gropper found Bellows's propensity for working class themes appealing, and attributed Henri's belief in art drawing as a "language, an expression of thoughts...and expression of life" as core to his own artistic sensibility. "To really understand life one must be a part of life," he later mused, in relation to this formative period in his life, "not just an observer or one who sits in an ivory tower."<sup>18</sup>

The two artists also brought Gropper to the Armory Show in 1913, where he was introduced to European pictorial modernism. Gropper later remembered being "stunned and disoriented" by the "strange creations he saw" when he visited the exhibition.<sup>19</sup> Gropper had just begun a new part-time job to support his own struggling parents and siblings when he saw these works, and notably, for him the disjunction was striking. "The effect of these pictures only hit me after several days on my new job," Gropper later wrote:

They crowded my brain in a kaleidoscope of nightmares, and all manner of wild goings-on. Yet on the job I must be terribly punctual. To the second. Punch the clock. Follow orders. On your toes every minute of the day. Give everything you have to the job. Become another self. A strange vision begins to form in my brain. Is it symbolism or insanity? I leave my hat and head outside. I punch the clock. My hands grope in the dark. I strain every muscle to earn my bread.<sup>20</sup>

Gropper found in the distorted figures by painters like Henri Matisse and Henri de Toulouse-Latrec—the fragmentations of artists like Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp—vivid metaphors for his own sense of alienation in the period. Through this engagement he also discovered

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<sup>17</sup> Gropper, in Taped Interview with Bruce Hooton (12 June 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Yossif Gaer, "As William Gropper Sees It," *The Jewish Tribune* (7 October 1927), 3, quoted in Phagan, "William Gropper and *Freiheit*," 39.

<sup>19</sup> Lozowick, *William Gropper*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Gropper, quoted by Lozowick, *William Gropper*, 23.

pictorial distortion and exaggerations of physiognomy could have a profoundly unsettling, visceral effect.

During his years at the Ferrer School he also began to learn about the history of political cartooning. If European modernism shaped his understanding of art as an expressive force, the history of political cartooning brought to light how this kind of pictorial language could be used against social and political systems. Gropper became especially interested in the biting satires of French satirist Honoré Daumier, whom his wife Sophie later described as his “bible and god.”<sup>21</sup> He may have also seen Daumier’s work in its original published context through Bellows’s and Henri’s colleague and friend John Sloan, who owned twelve volumes of *Le Charivari*.<sup>22</sup> Daumier and his colleagues at this French satirical journal harbored republican sympathies, and had used incendiary images of King Louis Philippe to challenge his rule.<sup>23</sup> Gropper embraced this sensibility in his own work over the years, using political satire to agitate authority figures and empower his viewers towards political change.<sup>24</sup>

Gropper’s views of caricature and cartooning were very much in line with his colleague Gardner Rea, who he had worked with at *New Masses* in the 1930s, another artist, moreover, who worked in both politically mainstream and leftist publications during the 1930s.<sup>25</sup> Like Rea, Gropper believed that caricatures had the power to strip those in power of their “mystic regalia,

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*,” 47; see also Ben Goldstein, “Daumier’s Spirit in American Art,” *Print Review* 11 (1980), 127-44.

<sup>22</sup> Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*,” 46-47.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Daumier’s incendiary use of political caricature, especially in relationship to the French monarchy, see Elizabeth C. Childs, “The Body Impolitic: Censorship and the Caricature of Honoré Daumier,” in *Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts*, ed. Elizabeth C. Childs (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 148-84.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, after a conservative women’s group had successfully had an early issue of *New Masses* removed from circulation, the magazine responded with a caricature by Gropper that reduced these women to spinsters with hag-like features. The act of censorship and Gropper’s response were published in the magazine in 1926.

<sup>25</sup> Rea’s work is covered in more detail in Chapter Three.

their imagined superiority, their simonized anointments of God,” as his colleague put it, by making such figures appear “ludicrous” instead of “apart, untouchable.”<sup>26</sup> Viewing art as a means of engagement, Gropper treated cartoons as the medium with the most “immediate effect” on his viewers—a pictorial language, he believed, which “interprets the situation of our life in the simplest form so that people can understand them at a glance.”<sup>27</sup>

## THE COMMISSION

What were the events that led to the publication of “Emperor Hirohito Gets a Nobel Peace Prize” in *Vanity Fair*? Even though the final result of the commission was highly incendiary, for editor Frank Crowninshield, at least, the work was conceived initially as a much less controversial satire designed to fit into the magazine’s established tone of irreverence and lighthearted wit. More specifically, Crowninshield had commissioned Gropper in the spring of 1935 to make what he later called “good natured” spoofs of some of the “best-known” figures of the day: *Not On Your Tintype*, which depicted five public figures depicted in completely absurd situations (see fig. 4.2).<sup>28</sup> In addition to Hirohito, this page of vignettes included caricatures of banker J.P. Morgan, Jr., as an anti-capitalist orator; profane populist Louisiana Senator Huey Long entering a monastery; conservative newspaper magnate William Hearst acting as ambassador to Communist Russia; and arctic explorer Admiral Richard E. Byrd wintering in tropical Tahiti. Each of these works was accompanied by a caption clarifying the subject of the work; and all of these lampoons—the subheading explained in the satire—were supposed to be “unlikely historical situations by one who is sick of the same old headlines.” Crowninshield had

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<sup>26</sup> Gardner Rea, Response in “Is Laughter a Weapon?: A Symposium,” *New Masses* (14 September 1937), 17.

<sup>27</sup> Gropper, *One Hundred Jewish Artists*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> “Japan to Protest New York Cartoon,” 1.

worked over the summer with Gropper, approving his images and offering suggestions; staff copywriter Helen Brown Norden was tasked to create the captions.<sup>29</sup>

A number of aspects about this commission suggest that Crowninshield had viewed the work not as a form of political satire but as a version that historian Wendy Rick Reaves has characterized as “celebrity caricature,” a mode of caricature that engages with a famous individual’s persona in an often clever, sometimes biting, but rarely derisive way through the stylization of physiognomy and allusions to widely familiar mannerisms.<sup>30</sup> This genre had become extremely popular in the 1920s, appearing most prominently in *Vanity Fair*, but also in a number of fan magazines that had developed alongside the burgeoning film industry such as *Shadowland* and *Photoplay*, and was closely linked to both the emergence of an entertainment industry and to the evolving role of portraiture in the period more generally.<sup>31</sup> In an early discussion of this type of caricature from 1900, cartoonist Carlo de Fornaro aptly described the art form as an “epigrammatic portrait of personality.”<sup>32</sup> Celebrity caricatures were cleverly abbreviated depictions of famous individuals that did not so much interrogate the person’s character but reaffirm the viewers’ understanding of them through familiar visual cues. As

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<sup>29</sup> Crowninshield corresponded with Gropper several times between April and June. The series of letters can be found in the William Gropper Papers. He received his paycheck in early June from the executive editor; Adele Ballot to William Gropper, 6 June 1935. Helen Brown Norden Lawrenson writes in her memoir that she abetted the controversy through her caption; see Lawrenson, *Stranger at the Party*, 82.

<sup>30</sup> See Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature in America*. Reaves’s study does not only focus on *Vanity Fair* but on the phenomenon more generally. However, as she notes, by the late 1920s, *Vanity Fair* was the chief publication featuring these kinds of works. The most prominent celebrity caricaturists of the period include Miguel Covarrubias, Ralph Barton, and Al Hirsch.

<sup>31</sup> Precursors to celebrity caricatures had existed since at least the seventeenth century, when Italian sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini created some of the first known caricatures of famous individuals, including Pope Innocent XI. However, whereas Bernini’s caricatures were drawings made for a private circle of viewers and thus had limited distribution, the goal of the modern celebrity caricaturist was to create an image that was both eye-catching and amusing, but also widely recognizable to a broad public. For more on Bernini’s works, see Irving Lavin, “High and low Before Their Time: Bernini and the Art of Social Satire,” in *High & Low: Modern Art, Popular Culture*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 8-51.

<sup>32</sup> Carlo de Fornaro, “Caricature and Cartoon: A Distinction,” *The Criterion* (October 1900), 6-7.

Reaves emphasizes, while these images might seem initially mocking, many celebrities and politicians enjoyed the attention they received from them. These works served as signs of their high level of recognition, in many ways furthering their fame.

*Vanity Fair* had primarily featured caricatures of Hollywood celebrities in the 1920s. As Reaves notes, these works were playful responses to the cult of personality that had been fostered in part through the promotion of celebrity photographs disseminated in magazines, and collected with the encouragement of Hollywood studios by the public. Studios and celebrities alike took advantage of this new form of portraiture to manage public perceptions, craft their own personas, and further their own fame and power.<sup>33</sup> By the 1930s, however, when *Not on Your Tintype* appeared in the magazine, *Vanity Fair* was also frequently publishing caricatures of politicians in the same vein. The emergence of this new kind of “celebrity caricature” reflected the increasingly blurred lines between celebrities and politicians in the period, as international leaders ranging from Franklin Roosevelt to the King of England to Adolf Hitler turned increasingly to the mass media forms to not only promote their agenda, but also themselves.

Notably, the caricatures of political figures in this vein in *Vanity Fair* often tended to foreground politician’s fame over any other aspect of the individual. Consider a two-page spread of caricatures by Frank Dunn that was published the same year as Gropper’s satire, which features stylized portraits of seventeen different prominent political figures, as exemplary (fig. 4.6). More accurately, each likeness in this page captures the essence of a “celebrated face,” as the caption states. Dunn organized these works as a visual game: each image is numbered and comprised of only one or two lines that signify the most widely recognized physiognomic features of the individuals. The viewer is invited to guess each caricature’s identity based on

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<sup>33</sup> Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature*, ix.

their keen familiarity not so much with the person's given role in society, but with his appearance: with Adolph Hitler's moustache depicted as a scribble in "no. 15," for example, or the wavy hair and distinct profile of Albert Einstein represented by a fluid, waving line, in "no. 1."

Many of the celebrity caricatures also operated as coy commentaries on the influence of the mass media on public perceptions. A work by Miguel Covarrubias of Benito Mussolini is a particular striking example of this type to appear in the magazine (fig. 4.7). Using a few curved lines that made the caricature look playfully childlike, Covarrubias had transformed the powerful dictator into a beady-eyed creature with a permanent scowl, creating a caricature that was biting sardonic but also served as a clever display of abbreviation and formalist abstraction.

In relation to this work, which drew the ire at least one conservative figure, Theodore Sedgewick, the rector of the St. Paul's American church in Rome, Crowninshield argued that the work should explicitly *not* be seen on political terms. Crowninshield stated in relation to this work in an essay published in 1933, "The artist's statement may be unorthodox, but is not intended to be malicious." Such works, he argued, required a keen sense of observation, and may seem "on the surface, to be uncomplimentary," to some viewers, but that "any interpretation as such is a misunderstanding of caricature's purpose."<sup>34</sup> Crowninshield treated satire from a privileged perspective of analytical distance. He argued in relation to this work that celebrity caricatures of politicians serve not to "analyze or criticize" but to create "vivid interpretations" of individuals.<sup>35</sup> This perspective undergirded all of his commissions, including Gropper's *Not on Your Tintype*.

Crowninshield included several features in *Not on Your Tintype* that were associated with

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<sup>34</sup> Frank Crowninshield, "The Editor's Uneasy Chair," *Vanity Fair* (January 1933), 9.

<sup>35</sup> Crowninshield (January 1933), 9.

this genre. As with Dunn's image, the fame of the individual figures is what unites the work thematically. The title of the work linked the images in a broad way to photographic medium through the word "tintype," a colloquial expression at this period for cheap photography. All of these figures were familiar through photographs disseminated in the news, including Hirohito; his caricature was a reversal of his equestrian portrait, widely published in the American press (fig. 4.8). But more specifically, most of the figures in Gropper's satire were particularly well known for either exploiting the media for personal gain or being understood within public life in a very narrow way. As a broader satire, the work offers a playful if irreverent take on the modern media.

And yet the individual works also spoofed their media persona in clever ways that often also hinted at a more subversive agenda by Gropper as well, suggesting a complex negotiation between the artist and the editor. For example, four of the five figures in the spoof (including Hirohito) were common targets of critique within the leftist press for their animosity towards Communists. One of the chief ways that Huey Long had become famous nationally was by broadcasting memorably flamboyant and provocative speeches that made promises to the working class in return for his political authority. To leftists, he was a prime symbol of the dangers of corrupt exploitation of the mass media. Gropper's illustration of Long going to a monastery is likely referring at least in part Long's embrace of vulgar profanity as a strategy of distinguishing himself from other politicians while also connecting with his populist base. The befuddled expression of the man, with an umbrella over his head, diminishes his grandeur.

Hearst, meanwhile, in his capacity as conservative news magnate, had not only been involved in furthering public personalities, but had also used his publications to slander politicians. Gropper's depiction of Hearst is likely a spoof of just such a slander. Hearst had



vehemently opposed Roosevelt's reelection campaign, calling him a Communist and dictator based on national recovery efforts that the businessman considered heavy-handed. The *Vanity Fair* work is a sly response. It shows Hearst as the president's chosen Ambassador to Russia, in a horse-drawn cart with the Soviet hammer and sickle on its side.<sup>36</sup> Gropper's caricature of Morgan as an anti-capitalist protestor, meanwhile, is an especially amusing subversion of the man's symbolic status as consummate capitalist. The juxtaposition of the sign, with the letters "Down with Capitalism," in front of the flailing banker is provocatively suggestive. It is even tempting to read the sign on its own terms, outside the context of the narrative, as a nose-thumbing gesture to the magazine's middle-and-upper class readers. All of these works are artful critiques embedded within a broader satire on each public figure's celebrity status.

Only the spoof of Navy admiral Richard Byrd, who was primarily known for his exploration of Antarctica where he had just completed his second expedition in early 1935, has nothing to do with politics.<sup>37</sup> It plays with popular understandings of the man as an explorer of extreme locales by showing him completely out of sorts in tropical Tahiti. Letters show that it was Crowninshield, not Gropper, who chose this subject for the broader satire.<sup>38</sup> Byrd's appearance is suggestive. As with the work by Dunn, which placed Hitler on the same level with Einstein who had recently left Germany because of the dictator's policies, this may have been a way for Crowninshield to attempt to neutralize the political subtext of Gropper's other images.

Gropper made stylistic choices that further alluded to the news media by depicting the

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<sup>36</sup> The work also playfully riffs on the public perceptions of both Roosevelt and Hearst: their individual politics, Hearst's penchant for political hyperbole, and the pair's well-known status as enemies.

<sup>37</sup> For more on his adventures, see Thomas S. Poulter, "Admiral Byrd's Solitary Vigil: A Dramatic Test of Courage," *New York Times* (20 January 1935), XX1.

<sup>38</sup> Crowninshield corresponded with Gropper several times between April and June. The series can be found in the William Gropper Papers. Much of the discussion involved the subject matter and the details of individual images. For a discussion regarding the pictorial details of the Byrd satire, see Frank Crowninshield to William Gropper, 3 June 1935, William Gropper Papers.

caricatures in subtly modulated gray tones stylistically reminiscent of news photography from the period. He was playful in his adaptation of this style, utilizing an abbreviated sense of line to alter certain features of the vignettes. While this is especially apparent in the case of his caricature of Hirohito in which he has used a few blocky shapes to denote the figure's body, in all of the works, Gropper demarcated both the hands and distinctive facial features through a few choice lines. The figures are diminutive in proportions, with heads unusually large for their squat bodies. He was drawing from the *portrait-charge* tradition that had first been used to satirize famous individuals in France and England in the nineteenth century, in which facial features are made more prominent through the diminution of the body, notably a distortion that served to visually emphasize the given figure's face as a personality.<sup>39</sup>

For Crowninshield, as he explained in responses to the controversy the work caused, the satire was meant to be lighthearted. "I doubt very much if there will be a protest, and I think things have been very much exaggerated," he explained in an interview. "It is a case of becoming excited about nothing."<sup>40</sup> Crowninshield viewed them as works that should be approached from a reasoned distance, and any outrage they caused was a problem rooted in the beholder and not in the creator. Within the framework of celebrity caricature, "Japanese Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize" was a spoof on the Japanese leader's public persona as well.

This privileged position constituted a completely different understanding of satire from that of Gropper, who treated political satire as corporeal language that could be used to provoke and to engage and engender communal outrage. Gropper embraced caricature as a visceral and

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<sup>39</sup> For more on the concept of the "charged image," see Ann Gould, ed., *Masters of Caricature from Hogarth and Gillray to Scarfe and Levine* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 85; Beatrice Farwell, *The Charged Image: French Lithographic Caricature, 1816-1848* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1990); examples of this style in American art can be found in William Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humor*, vol. 2 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1938).

<sup>40</sup> "Japan to Protest New York Cartoon," 1.

direct language with explosive possibilities that could be used to break down power structures. Just as importantly, Crowninshield's position also underestimated the power that such works could have within the global marketplace, where the American notions of personality and celebrity could easily be misinterpreted. Whether or not Gropper knew that the works would be seen abroad in Japan is unknown. But when we look more closely at Gropper's anti-fascist activism and examine "Japanese Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize" within this larger context, it becomes clear that Gropper was using this commission to create an incendiary work. More specifically, Gropper exploited the potent symbolism of the emperor to interrogate Japan's ideology of fascism and create a richly layered attack.

## **GROPPER AND ANTI-FASCIST SATIRE**

Perhaps it is not surprising, given his sustained engagement with leftist activism in general, that Gropper had been one of the first cartoonists to actively engage with anti-fascist issues in political satire published in the 1930s. He produced a number of sharp cartoons ridiculing Hitler during the dictator's rise to power.<sup>41</sup> And while his caricature of Hirohito may have been his first major work lampooning the emperor, it was not the artist's only cartoon to engage with Japanese militarism. Between 1931 and 1935, Gropper made a small number of works using allegorical figures to represent the aggressive imperialist forces in Japan for leftist magazines that included *Freiheit* and *New Masses* (see figs. 4.9 and 4.10).<sup>42</sup> He created these for an American readership presumed to be both working class and sympathetic to leftist ideologies and engaged primarily with Communist understandings of fascism.

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<sup>41</sup> For more on his early work on European fascism, see Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 17-19.

<sup>42</sup> See Phagan, "William Gropper and *Freiheit*," for a comprehensive list of his anti-fascist work for the magazine.

The Communist International Movement (hereafter “Comintern”) had an evolving position towards this ideology, initially treating fascism as a counterrevolutionary force that was on the one hand a dangerous outgrowth of capitalism. The Party had taken a more serious stance in the early 1930s, after the rapid political ascent of Hitler in Germany, and in the 1933 Congress, the Comintern defined fascism as “an open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements.”<sup>43</sup> The CPUSA with which Gropper had close ties had followed these directives.<sup>44</sup> A closer look at how these perspectives applied to Japanese militarism specifically—an ideology at times designated “fascist” in the period literature, but often also characterized as “imperialist”—helps us to understand Gropper’s broader strategies of attack in his early engagement with this subject.

When it came to issues related to Japanese militarism, Gropper and other anti-fascist activists believed that this dangerous development had been shaped by what they cast as the country’s ongoing preoccupation with economic growth, which had been intertwined with its rapid process of industrial modernization. This process had begun after U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry had forced the isolationist Tokugawa Shogunate to open ports for trade in 1853, but had not fully developed until later in Emperor Meiji’s reign (1867-1912), also known as the Meiji Restoration. During this key period in Japanese history, the feudalist Shogunate government and caste system that had been in operation for many centuries was dissolved, and was replaced by a bureaucratic monarchy comprised of the emperor as the political head of a Prime Minister, cabinet, and legislative Diet. The emperor had largely served as a figurehead

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<sup>43</sup> “Extracts from the Theses of the Thirteenth ECCI Plenum on Fascism, the War Danger, and the Tasks of Communist Parties,” ed. Degras, *The Communist International*, vol. 3 (December 1933), 303, as quoted in Phagan, “William Gropper and *Freiheit*,” 270.

<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these changes see Phagan, 268-70. For a broader discussion of early anti-fascist art production in general, see also Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 8-34.

under the Shogunate system, but he now assumed a new role of supreme political leader, with the Prime Minister and Cabinet making many of the day-to-day decisions. The country had also begun to adopt western technologies and socioeconomic policies—developing industrial factories, for instance—as a strategy of nationalist and economic survival against western colonization.<sup>45</sup>

Gropper and his colleagues treated Japan’s first military advancements in this period—their victories in wars against China (1894) and Russia (1904)—as the first indications of the country’s imperialist ambitions.<sup>46</sup> Describing this history in their major study *Militarism and Fascism in Japan* in 1934, Russian authors O. Tanin and E. Yohan argued these early events signaled a “readiness for conquest as a means for supporting the rate of capitalist accumulation.”<sup>47</sup> Communist activists like Tanin and Yohan treated the attacks on China in their own period as the outgrowth of this capitalist ambition, but also linked Japanese aggression to the growth of chauvinistic nationalism. This political discourse had been present since the Meiji restoration but developed further in the 1910s and 1920s in response to the emergence of more liberal forces in that period.<sup>48</sup> The years between the Meiji Restoration and the Hirohito’s rule in 1926 had been marked by the increasing influence of the bureaucracy on government affairs, and this period witnessed further assimilation of western ideals in the form of individualism as well as the burgeoning of socialist and communist labor activism. These changes were met with

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<sup>45</sup> This period of rapid change is widely covered in histories of Japan. For some of the political dimensions, see, for example, Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 84-191; Chushichi Tsuzuki, *The Pursuit of Modern Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100-181. See also, O. Tanin and E. Yohan, *Militarism and Fascism in Japan* (New York: International Publisher, 1934), with an essay by Japanese nationalist General Sadao Araki in the appendix.

<sup>46</sup> For more on these military battles see Hane, *Modern Japan*, 84-181.

<sup>47</sup> Tanin and Yohan, *Militarism and Fascism in Japan*. 37.

<sup>48</sup> This was due in part to weaknesses in Emperor Taisho’s reign. See discussion in Tsuzuki, *The Pursuit of Modern Japan*, 223-67.

resistance from reactionary forces that had grown wary of the upheaval these ideals had inspired, especially among workers dissatisfied with their social and economic conditions.

Notably, these nationalist leaders became more influential after a major earthquake destroyed much of Tokyo in 1923, the confusing and terrible aftermath of which they exploited to forward their own extremist agendas. They launched a program of suppression against liberals and leftists through the enactment of authoritarian policies, including the so-called Peace Preservation Laws of 1925, which forbade any political organizing or speeches the government considered to be anti-Japanese. By the time Hirohito began his reign the following year, this conservative faction had already become a major force in the Cabinet and the military. To Gropper and his colleagues, Japan's attack on Manchuria in 1931 was an extension of these policies, aimed at threatening not only Japan's leftist front but also Communism in general, especially as embodied in Soviet Russia, which borders the Manchurian province.<sup>49</sup>

Gropper's early works on Japanese militarism largely engage these issues in emblematic terms, using familiar signs, symbols, and labels to construct a dichotomous contrast between the Communist left and the combined forces of capitalism and militarism. However, he also exploits grotesque bodily distortions and compositional clues to make this dichotomous structure more vivid, registering in seemingly visceral terms the threat of Japan. What makes these early works provocative is the discomfiting associations these pictorial choices evoke—especially in relation to constructions of race in the period—and when we more closely examine this dynamic we can have a better sense of how Gropper used, in his own words, caricature as a direct language that can produce an “immediate effect.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Discussions of Chinese events can be found in Jonathan Spence, “Part III: Envisioning State and Society,” in *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 265-410.

<sup>50</sup> Gropper, *One Hundred Jewish Artists*, 72

In one of his earliest such images, created for Communist affiliated *Freiheit* in 1932, he depicts in a crude graphic style a figure of Japan represented as a large man wearing a military uniform with an oversized head, huge mouth, and large body with diminutive arms and hands, running towards the viewer (see fig. 4.9). In the background, he depicts two cannons, a motif, notably, that anticipates his use of a cannon shaped scroll in the *Vanity Fair* image. The figure in the center of the cartoon is not so much a man but a beast—his only human attributes being his bipedal physical structure, the clothes he wears that link him specifically to the Japanese military, and his small fists, one of which holds a bloodied samurai sword. His large gaping mouth with pointed teeth dominates the composition, occupying most of the figure’s face at the center of the cartoon. Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that mouths have long had grotesque associations as sites of consumption and expulsion, and here the figure seems poised to bite his victim.<sup>51</sup> Although the sign Gropper depicts in the right foreground indicates that the intended victim is Soviet Russia, the figure runs directly towards the viewer. Gropper has used the confrontational composition to affiliate the presumably leftist working-class readers in New York to the Soviets threatened in this work. This disturbing work suggests that an attack on Soviet Russia is an attack on all leftists.

The broad mouth with sharp teeth is a visceral metaphor for greed in this allegorical image. “Japan’s” pointed teeth are reminiscent of canine animals but also simians—and his bloodied knife and dripping shoes make the horrifying suggestion of brutal savagery even more imminent. Through these evocative allusions, created in a self-consciously crude style—a visual language that seems to echo the violent sensibility of the subject—Gropper has registered in deeply unsettling terms the threat of Japanese fascism to the left.

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<sup>51</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 316-17.

While it was not uncommon to define a political enemy in subhuman terms, this approach also had broader implications in this particular work in relation to discourses on race in this period. This caricature and its distorted elements can be mapped onto a racialized discourse around the threatening “Other” that had been linked to Japan, specifically, since the turn of the century. American society held an evolving view towards Japan since first sustained interaction in the 1850s that had shaped racial constructions of the country’s constituents. As historian Rotem Kowner writes, the Japanese initially seemed to defy “the ‘unwritten’ rules” of colonial encounter, seeming “neither submissive nor uncivilized” and were actively involved in shaping their own national identities.<sup>52</sup> However, attitudes started to shift as Japan began to assert its own military presence in the Pacific towards the end of the century, and by the early twentieth century, growing anxieties about this emergent world power began to coalesce around a discourse of ideas, texts, laws, and images that came to be known as the “Yellow Peril.”<sup>53</sup>

It is important to note that a discourse of the “Yellow Peril” was already emerging in the nineteenth century, though before it had been linked primarily to anxieties about the influx of Chinese immigrants into the United States since the 1850s. The growing presence of the Chinese, first on the west coast and then in New York, engendered xenophobic fears of racial mixing further fueled by a scientific discourse in the period that treated the Chinese as an inferior race.<sup>54</sup> Underlying these fears were economic imperatives linked to the use of Chinese laborers to fill a need for cheap unskilled labor in the second half of the nineteenth century. The country’s white

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<sup>52</sup> Rotem Kowner, “‘Lighter than Yellow, but not Enough’: Western Discourse on the Japanese ‘Race,’” *The Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (March 2000), 104.

<sup>53</sup> The “Yellow Peril” trope has been widely discussed in secondary literature. See, for example, Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 106-43; William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1982).

<sup>54</sup> See Lee, *Orientalism*, 51-82.



working class—many who were also recent immigrants—viewed Chinese workers as a threat to their own economic stability. As historian Robert Lee notes in his study on Asians in American popular culture, the consolidation of the white working class hinged on the degradation of the Chinese laborer and other racial groups. Although Chinese immigrants had come to the U.S. as free workers, writes Lee, they found themselves segregated into a “racially defined state of subordination as ‘coolie labor.’”<sup>55</sup> These workers—often single, almost always male—were believed to be a threat to the family, and by extension the broader social organism of the U.S. body politic.

Japan began to be affiliated with the “Yellow Peril” when they asserted their own economic and political power in the Pacific at the turn of the century, their military victories against Korea, China, and Russia seen as ominous signs of their military capabilities. Notably, during this period the U.S. was expanding its political powers, and Japan posed a viable threat to their colonial interests in Southeast Asia, as well the colonial interests of European empires. As German painter Herman Knackfuss’s 1895 painting *People of Europe, Guard Your Dearest Goods* indicates, Westerners tended to imagine this threat in exoticized terms (fig. 4.11). In the foreground of this early representation of the “Yellow Peril,” emblematic figures standing for European nations—all neoclassical constructions—look into a valley towards the enemy. Knackfuss depicts a cross above this party of figures. This contrasts with the Buddhist sculpture emanating from the clouds afar, a provocative symbol of heathenism. Here the artist maps a set of binaries between West and East, correlating it with the thematics of Christian and “heathen,” and implicitly “White” and “Yellow.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Lee, *Orientalism*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> A number of representations of the “Yellow Peril” emerged in these years. One of the most prominent popular representations was Sax Roemer’s *Fu Manchu* novels, which featured the lead character as a

The “Yellow Peril” conflated Japan’s political ambitions with anxieties about Chinese immigration, reconstituting these economic and social fears into a single racialized threat of the Other. They were considered the “greatest threat to Western civilization and the White Race” to eugenicists and anti-immigration activists like Lothrop Stoddard, whose popular book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* was published in 1920.<sup>57</sup> Gropper’s *Freiheit* caricature of Japan attacking the viewer engages with this discourse, picturing Japan not as a heathen enemy but as a monstrous subhuman creature readied to attack the viewer. However, Gropper’s work transmutes the dichotomy of West/East into a construction of Communism verses Imperialist Capitalism. Notably, the grotesque figure in the foreground leads an army comprised of fighter planes and two military tanks, one of which is populated with men wearing top hats. These figures are generically emblematic, familiar signs of capitalism, created to signify Japan’s economic ambitions. Readers of this leftist paper would have been familiar with these figures from numerous cartoons in this daily as well as in other leftist publications. Gropper exploits racialized anxieties here to fuel a deeper sense of threat to Communism, creating a call to arms in vividly graphic terms for his readers.<sup>58</sup>

Gropper also implies something similar in a somewhat later work in *New Masses*, a cover image published in February 1934, which likewise depicts Japan as an allegorical figure attacking the Soviet Union, this time signified through the word “U.S.S.R.” scrawled in the corner (see fig. 4.10). But in this case, he visualizes the country not so much as a monstrous beast but as an aggressive samurai warrior flying through the air with his sword swung high,

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villain with a master plot to take over the world. These pulp novels were first published in the 1910s, and then again in the 1930s-1950s.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Lee, *Orientalism*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> This image also recalls the anti-capitalist critiques of WWI posted by artists and writers working in *The Masses*, as discussed in Chapter One.

wearing stereotypically Japanese attire, the kimono, in this case decorated with Nazi swastikas. While the sartorial patterning affiliates the allegorical figure with broader fascist ideologies, his samurai identity in this work also serves as a distinctly exotic inscription of Japan. This is a suggestive choice, since the samurai had long been admired in Japan as part of a warrior class of protectors disbanded during the Meiji Restoration. They had been affiliated with honor and duty in the nation, and militarists looked to them as role models. Here, Gropper undermines this idealized construction by affiliating the samurai with distinctly more subhuman characteristics, through the use of body hair, as well as physiognomic distortions affiliated with denigrating ethnic caricatures such as slanted eyes and buck teeth.<sup>59</sup>

These attributes mark the aggressive figure as more simian and suggest that samurai warriors are not only from the past, but also more primitive. Thus while decidedly less deformed than the emblematic depiction in the earlier *Freiheit* image, this figure is nonetheless similarly coded through physiognomic markers as not only a dangerous, but also more barbaric “Other.” Like the earlier work, moreover, Gropper uses a confrontational composition to suggest this figure’s enemy is not just Soviet Russia but also the imagined viewer, though in this work—made after the Comintern shifted its position on fascism to define it as “an open, terrorist dictatorship”—the militarist ideologies are no longer affiliated with emblems of capitalism.

Gropper may have also been using these various attributes to make a more topical reference to the nationalist discourse in Japan, which exalted, as Tanin and Yohan provocatively

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<sup>59</sup> During World War II, the U.S. government would similarly characterize the Japanese as buck-toothed in their military propaganda, with a “marked squint” and more facial hair than the Chinese. For a vivid example, see Milton Caniff, *How to Spot a Jap* (1942), a comic strip prepared and distributed to soldiers by the U.S. Army. Using a combination of diagrams and text, Caniff’s argues that soldiers in battle in China can tell the difference between their ally and their foe through the appearance, feet, and pronunciation of certain words. According to this text, the Japanese have a more “lemon yellow” appearance than the Chinese, they are stockier and hairier, they have calloused toes from wearing wooden sandals, and they hiss their “s” and have more trouble than the Chinese pronouncing the “liquid l.”

called it, the “Japanese war spirit,” through its elevation of the samurai traditions of the past.<sup>60</sup>

One of the most prominent militant nationalists, Army General Sadao Araki, specifically carried a samurai sword in honor of these traditions. And notably, only two months before the work had appeared in *New Masses*, the Japanese Army had discarded the “tailor’s sword” mainly used for parades and replaced it with the sword of the samurai, which they planned to use in battle.

Reports in the American press in the period highlighted the deadly and historically loaded nature of these swords. Revealing their stereotypical understanding of the traditional Japanese warrior, they emphasized the samurai sword’s ability to “cut through the water jacket and barrel of a Chinese machine-gun at a single stroke.”<sup>61</sup> In relation to these reports, these attributes in this cartoon would have brought to mind these deadly implications. Notably, Gropper also depicts this figure wearing a more modern military rifle and ammunitions belt, but choosing to use the sword instead. This choice seems suggest that the guns and modern artillery the Japanese use are merely the latest tool of a more “primitive” people with a deeply rooted warrior identity.

While these works deal primarily with the Yellow Peril in relation to Japanese aggression abroad, it should be noted that the threatening presence in these works may have also engaged broader anxieties about the Asian Other for some of the working class viewers. These works take on an added meaning when examined in relation to satires that invoke concerns about the Yellow Peril at home. Consider the subtext of a work by Jacob Burck from 1934, for example, that utilizes the stereotype of the “coolie” worker to denigrate the Civil Works Act (CWA), the agency created to place unskilled workers into construction jobs, not unlike railroad positions

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<sup>60</sup> Tanin and Yohan, *Militarism and Fascism in Japan*, 58.

<sup>61</sup> “Samurai Swords for Japan’s Army: Officers Will Discard Present ‘Toy’ Weapons,” *New York Times* (31 December 1933), E8.

occupied by many Chinese laborers in the 1800s (fig. 4.12).<sup>62</sup> By conflating the CWA with what he derogatively calls the “Coolie Works Act”—depicting laborers in tattered clothes with bamboo cone hats—Burck’s goal is to criticize the agency as an exploitive federal initiative. But implicit in this work is the belief that the American work force—the organized proletariat reading *Daily Worker*—was fundamentally better than the coolie worker. This work brings to the surface the uncomfortable racial dynamics underlying proletarian organization. Gropper’s early caricatures of Japanese imperialism similarly exploit these racial prejudices to engender a sense of collective community in the viewers, aimed at a common foreign threat.

In his caricature of Hirohito for *Vanity Fair*, Gropper also exploits racial prejudices through his own use of the Asian coolie (see fig. 4.1). It was this pictorial choice specifically, we might recall, that the Japanese found especially insulting. More specifically, he utilizes the wagon carrying the scroll to affiliate Hirohito with the “coolie” laborer. As Burck’s CWA-themed cartoon evidences, this was a familiar symbol for degradation not only in Japan—where unskilled workers were considered the lowest forms of life—but also in the U.S. Burck had also published a satire in his collection *Hunger and Revolt* (1935) entitled “A Century of Progress” that uses the context of the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition as a pretext for mocking both bourgeois capitalism and the “progress” that it has brought (fig. 4.13). He depicts a well-dressed obese couple being pulled in a rickshaw by a Chinese driver—as signified by his conical hat and dress—using this trope of degradation as a metaphor for capitalist exploitation. Gropper may have had this very work in mind when he created his caricature of Hirohito, though the “coolie” driver was also a widely familiar emblem for the exotic East in popular culture. His readers in *Vanity Fair*, for example, would have been familiar with these more romanticized

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<sup>62</sup> Chapter Three deals with Burck’s other kinds of critiques of federal aid programs, especially those that use the broken male body as a metaphor for an emasculated work force.

images of coolies in advertisements like the one for Packard Cars published in the magazine in 1930, an illustration that features coolie workers pulling a wheeled *junrikisha* (literally “human-powered vehicle”) with an aristocrat inside of it (fig. 4.14). In this particular example, the company is using the coolie laborer as a metaphor for “Luxurious Transportation,” drawing similarities between the *junrikisha* and their cars. Notably, in this work, the coolies are diminished to near invisibility in the text, which transmutes their laboring bodies into “silent, swift, and luxurious” travel. This work also makes vividly clear the casual racism and dehumanization of mainstream U.S. attitudes towards the Asian coolie class.

Unlike the body of the figures in these two works—and unlike the figure in his depiction of Japan as a samurai—Gropper does not further exoticize Hirohito through sartorial attributes in his *Vanity Fair* caricature. Nor is his depiction of Hirohito intimidating. To the contrary, Hirohito appears diminutive and even lifeless, his face blank as his body moves forward. Gropper relies on a different set of corporeal distortions from these earlier works to render this subject with a body marked as socially inferior. In the case of this work, Hirohito looks less like a threatening monster than a little boy with a toy cart. While not as explicitly linked to the notion of the “Yellow Peril” core to the earlier works, this work still diminishes the Japanese villain through a different bodily discourse. It is not surprising, given the position of the emperor in Japanese society, that the work would have been so offensive to officials. And yet these choices have other implications as well, especially when considered in the broader context of militarism.

### **GROPPER’S ATTACK ON JAPANESE MILITARISM**

The primary joke in Gropper’s caricature of Hirohito revolves around the absurd nature of the caption “Japanese Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize,” which refers directly to the

award that had been given out almost every year since the turn of the century for diplomatic resolutions to political tensions. The most recent recipient—as readers of *Vanity Fair* would have known—had been British Minister of Labor Arthur Henderson in 1934 for his work with the League of Nations on disarmament efforts in Europe. The year before, another member of the British Parliament, Sir Ralph Angell—a writer and executive at the World Committee Against War and Fascism—had been similarly awarded for his disarmament efforts on the League, one of the central concerns of which had been Japan’s wanton aggressions in northeastern China.<sup>63</sup> The allusion to the Prize is provocative, as it ties directly to geopolitical tensions at this historical moment.

But this allusion to peace is also inflammatory for other reasons as well. As would have been readily apparent to viewers at the time, the League had not been the only political organization affiliated with the term “peace” in this period. Japan also embraced this term, exploiting its open-ended meaning to promote its totalitarian agenda, and defining the preservation and spread of “peace” as the dissolution of disorder and political dissent. Japanese nationalists had strived in the 1920s to construct a more ordered populace, as we might recall, through the enactment of the so-called “Peace Preservation Laws,” which were designed to shut down political organizing by liberals and leftists. In the 1930s, these forces also exploited this conception of peace to justify their broader imperialist agenda launched in Manchuria and later Shanghai, which they had invaded in 1932. China had been a politically unstable country for more than a century, thanks in part to the colonial exploitation by western empires. Endowed with their own sense of racial and cultural superiority, Japanese nationalists felt it their duty to bring greater “peace”—in the form of their own cultural ideals—to this nation. Treating their

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<sup>63</sup> The list of Nobel Peace Prize laureates can be retrieved at <http://www.nobelprize.org>.

mission in China as a purification of the “dangerous” elements of western modernity, they characterized their imperialist mission as a fight for the greater survival of Asia against the pollutant force of the West.<sup>64</sup>

Gropper’s punning use of the scroll is especially suggestive in this context, as it highlights the slippage in meaning of this country’s nationalist rhetoric, while also alluding to the more violent actions undergirding these imperialist missions. While chauvinist leaders had claimed to be serving a mission of “peace,” news reports in the period made clear that their treatment of the Chinese during their military exploits was far from just. One such report from the Associated Press in 1932, which focuses on the abuse of Chinese workers, makes the gap between their action and their rhetoric explicit, and is striking in relation to Gropper’s juxtaposition of the different elements. “Half-clad, mute, and carefully masking their own reactions,” this report states, “gangs of coolies are taken forward each morning to the front lines to carry ammunition for the big guns that send death to their own brothers and cousins across No Man’s Land...When the day is over again the coolies are again herded together at the point of a bayonet...checked off and taken aboard trucks.”<sup>65</sup> “But not all of them come back,” this report concludes in a coded reference to the guns pointed at these workers. “Frequently they suffer casualties,” and “often one comes back carried by his fellows and heavily bandaged....” The journalist goes on to state that the Japanese deny such reports of abuse of this “wheel-barrow and rickshaw brigade” of workers.<sup>66</sup> Within this context, Gropper’s use of the “peace” scroll/cannon—on a wagon, no less—is unsettling. This relationship drew attention to the

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<sup>64</sup> See Sadao Araki, “Problems Facing Japan in the Era of Showa,” reprinted in the Appendix, in Tanin and Yohan, *Militarism and Fascism in Japan*.

<sup>65</sup> “Coolies are Impressed to Aid Japan’s Gunners; Handle Shells on Front at Point of Bayonet,” *New York Times* (27 February 1932), 6.

<sup>66</sup> “Coolies are Impressed to Aid Japan’s Gunners,” 6.



abusive labor system upon which much of Japanese imperialism was based. By conflating the emperor with unskilled workers in a caricature focused on militarism, Gropper was making a distinctly uncomfortable association.

The term “peace” also ties specifically to Emperor Hirohito himself, whose reign had been designated the “Showa”—or “peace”—era, when he assumed his title in 1926. Thus even Hirohito’s body serves as a double-edged symbol for Japan’s construction of “peace preservation” in this work. The highly decorated military uniform that Hirohito wears in this work has multiple symbolic implications within this context. Westernized uniforms had long been tied to the project of modernization and the growth of military power since Emperor Meiji’s reign, in which they appeared in the first widely distributed imperial portrait photographs.<sup>67</sup> A comparison to photographs from the period shows that Gropper had been interested in constructing an accurate representation of this uniform, which Hirohito wore often, though not always, in his public portraits (see figs. 4.8 and 4.15). Yet when this element is applied to his depiction of this figure, this sartorial choice seems rather awkward. Gropper has used the uniform to dress a figure represented as a subversion of male strength and health. The sword he wears is longer than his stubby legs. Notably, this is the tailor’s sword and not the samurai implement adopted by the military in 1933 to show greater prowess among soldiers. Gropper aligns the sword’s handle to meet the Emperor’s groin area, where two cords from the figure’s uniform also hang limply—a visually charged juxtaposition to say the least, spoofing the emperor’s potency in vulgarly phallic terms. Whereas the earlier representation of Japan

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<sup>67</sup> For more on the use of uniforms in Japanese culture—especially in relation to emperors—see Nicolas Cambridge, “Cherry Picking Sartorial Identities in Cherry-Blossom Land: Uniforms and Uniformity in Japan,” *Journal of Design History* 24, no. 2 (2011), 173-74.

pictorially dramatizes the country's threatening presence in the East, this work alludes to it through the uniform while simultaneously mocking it.

In this work, the emperor serves as a charged symbol for Japan's military policies that is mocked through the vulgar language of distortion. Gropper uses bodily distortion and a reference to coolies as a means to symbolize fascist ideology itself. In this respect, Gropper's cartoon corresponds to the use of satire to visualize the "presence of disease in the social organism," to use his leftist colleague Mabel Dwight's words.<sup>68</sup> In this way his work is similar to satires by Burck and Rea, discussed in Chapter Three, which use the language of bodily transgression to allegorize the New Deal. Applied to the body of Hirohito, however—a body marked as Asian through the emperor's own features and through the incendiary cart—these bodily deformations have an explicitly racial subtext. Like his earlier works about Japan, these distortions have the effect of marking the figure as primitive. This is significant, not only because it facilitates xenophobic anxieties for many U.S. viewers, but also because in this case it also challenges the Japanese government's more purist constructions of the country's citizens.

Core to the militarist belief system was the idea that the Japanese were superior to the "white race," and that the most perfect embodiment of the Japanese body was the emperor, according to Araki, whose "glorification" should "take precedence over private, personal welfare."<sup>69</sup> While the Japanese officials never said so explicitly, these affiliations would have been especially charged implications within their country. Although their complaint focused on the proper representation of their emperor, these deeper issues were just under the surface.

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<sup>68</sup> Mabel Dwight, "Satire in Art" (1939), in *Art for the Millions*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor. New York: New York Graphic Society: 1973), 151.

<sup>69</sup> Araki, "Problems Facing Japan in the Era of Showa," 302.

What we have in Gropper's cartoon, ultimately, is a densely packed image that operated in multiple ways within its printed context, through a number of highly provocative associations. It was a work that Crowninshield initiated to serve a lighthearted purpose within a magazine that avoided engaging many of the political issues that dominated the 1930s. And yet through the charged language of the body and through a set of juxtapositions and visual puns, Gropper was able to interrogate broader themes of political power, nationalism, militarism, and Japan's imperialist expansionism. This work was created at a moment that was marked by escalating tensions between Japan and much of the rest of the world and when the U.S.-Japan relations were rapidly deteriorating. Within this context, it is also important to recognize the possible impact of the work on U.S. viewers. Readers of this magazine who saw this cartoon had already become quite familiar with Japan's aggressions against China beginning with their first attack in 1931, when their military forces manufactured an explosion in the Manchurian province as a pretense for invasion. Many of the newspapers and periodicals, including *Vanity Fair*, had covered these ongoing events.<sup>70</sup> These included Japan's installation of a puppet government in Manchuria in 1932, along with the government's efforts to exploit natural resources; and a similar attack in China's Shanghai province that same year. Japan had left the League of Nations in 1933 after being reprimanded for their actions in the Pacific and only a year before the work was published, had refused to sign a naval treaty with the U.S. and England, which both had trade interests in China.<sup>71</sup> The punch line of the satire was built upon the uncomfortable reality that Japan had emerged in recent years as an unpredictably bellicose nation with an aggressive expansionist policy that the League of Nations had failed to contain.

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Close, "What We Don't Know About Japan," 13-15.

<sup>71</sup> Close, "What We Don't Know About Japan," 13-15.

## THE AFTERMATH

Even after the controversy erupted, Crowninshield claimed that the work was lighthearted fare.<sup>72</sup> Crowninshield, as well as much of the mainstream press, cast the “international incident”—as the controversy was called—as a mere cultural misunderstanding. Notably, U.S. Secretary of State Hull, who was also forced by the Japanese to weigh in on the issue and apologize, also expressed this view.<sup>73</sup> Hull no doubt took this stance to avoid further tensions with Japan, which had recently left the League of Nations because the organization had reprimanded the country for its actions. However, using the notion of “cultural difference” expressed by Crowninshield, the Secretary displaced the satire’s military implications and its primitivizing subtexts, even if this framing still alluded to the vast differences between the two countries.<sup>74</sup>

While Crowninshield had made light of the controversy, treating it as minor event that he hoped would fade quickly, Gropper and his leftist colleagues viewed the incident as a major event. Gropper’s colleagues reveled in the effect that the caricature had on this geographically distant audience, characterizing it as a “thunderbolt,” to use American Contemporary Art Gallery (also known as the ACA Gallery) owner Herman Baron’s term that proved the potency of caricature as a political weapon.<sup>75</sup> To the editors at *New Masses*, who published a reaction to the controversy immediately following the event, the work was like an “old master” image that was

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<sup>72</sup> “I doubt very much if there will be a protest, and I think things have been very much exaggerated,” Crowninshield explained in an interview; “It is a case of becoming excited about nothing.” “Japan to Protest New York Cartoon,” 1.

<sup>73</sup> “Regret Expressed to Japan by Hull,” 11.

<sup>74</sup> Remarkably, Conde Nast later said he would have suppressed the image rather than offend Japan. Speaking of the risk of “terrible horror of modern warfare,” his comments reveal the severity of the matter for the U.S. See “Conde Nast Returns: Would Have Suppressed Cartoon Rather than Offend,” *New York Times* (7 September 1935), 13.

<sup>75</sup> Baron, *Gropper*.

powerful enough to make “the fascist forces [in Japan]...jittery.”<sup>76</sup> The work assumed legendary status beside the pantheon of socially minded artists that for leftist activists included such agitating artists as Daumier and Thomas Nast.

Gropper himself not only refused to apologize; he also vowed to respond with even more inflammatory work.<sup>77</sup> Although scholars often single out Gropper’s *Vanity Fair* caricature for the controversy it caused, this satire was far from the only work the artist made about Hirohito. “Emperor Hirohito Getting the Nobel Peace Prize” marks the beginning of a more sustained satirical attack on the Japanese sovereign carried out for the rest of the decade in cartoons that Gropper made for leftist periodicals and anti-fascist themed exhibitions. These later works appear primarily in *New Masses* and in a 1938 exhibition held at the ACA Gallery, a venue run by leftist activist Herman Baron. They contribute to the Popular Front’s efforts to bring attention to Japan as an urgent global threat: the second half of the decade was marked by the Sino-Chinese War (beginning in 1937) and the solidification of their pact with Germany and Italy (formalized in 1940). These later satires challenge familiar understandings of Gropper’s *Vanity Fair* caricature as a singular work within his oeuvre.

While they share the same subject matter, however, they differ in important ways from his *Vanity Fair* work. Stylistically and iconographically, they have more in common with his earlier, more emblematic, representations of Japan. While the *Vanity Fair* caricature involves a layering of visual idioms and clever visual puns, the later works are far more pointedly direct. In all of these later satires, Hirohito appears not as a deflated leader but as an aggressive threat, often wielding a weapon while depicted in a threatening stance. Like his earlier emblematic satires of Japan, these works also draw upon negative racial stereotypes to make Japan appear

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<sup>76</sup> “Gropper vs. the Mikado,” *New Masses* (13 August 1935), 3.

<sup>77</sup> “Tintype of Divinity,” 22.

primitive and barbaric. A closer look at all of these issues provides a more nuanced understanding about the role of anti-fascist satire towards the end of the decade.

Gropper's first work made in this vein, "The Mikado Behind the Japanese Screen," was the most multi-layered of these images and the one most closely tied in theme to the *Vanity Fair* satire (fig. 4.16). A full-page satire that was published in *New Masses* immediately after the controversy, it served as Gropper's retort to the Japanese government represented in visual form. The work features a caricature of Hirohito wearing a knee length kimono decorated with small swastikas, a pair of ammunition belts across his chest, and a large military rifle on his back. Like the real Hirohito, the figure in the satire has a small moustache, wears round spectacles, and has a side part in his hairdo. The title refers to him by the Western colloquial term for the emperor, "Mikado," popularized by the nineteenth-century British opera of the same name by Gilbert and Sullivan.

Aside from these features, the caricature hardly resembles the sovereign that was depicted with a fair degree of physiognomic accuracy in the *Vanity Fair* satire. Rather, he is far closer in appearance to the samurai flying in the air in Gropper's cartoons of Japan, published a year earlier in *New Masses* in 1934 (see fig. 4.10). Not only does he wear a nearly identical robe to that earlier figure, but also holds a sword that is similarly marked with dark smears that signify blood. As with the earlier image, Gropper also uses certain physiognomic features—including the hirsute arms and stubbly face—to make Hirohito look more barbaric. He also chooses to depict Hirohito in a costume affiliated more closely with Japan than the westernized military suit that Japanese emperors had begun adopting as their public form of dress during the Meiji Empire.

The emperor's confrontational body is blocked from the viewer by a large Japanese-style folding screen. The motif of the screen itself is significant, as it represents a high art tradition that the West associated with Japan.<sup>78</sup> Gropper depicts several different motifs on this screen that are linked to Japanese nationalism: including drawings of Mount Fuji and the round "sun" that appeared on their flags, both symbols of renewal and birth; a dove with an olive branch of peace in its mouth on a juniper branch, which symbolized "mercy" in Japanese imperial regalia; a meditating figure on with a hair knot resembling an *usnisha* (or cranial protuberance), an attribute of Buddha; and a Japanese calligraphic text. The figure resembling Buddha, depicted on the far right, also has the label, "peace," written on his cloak. He wears glasses that made him look like Hirohito, who, we might recall, was also known as the emperor of "Showa" or "peace." The text, meanwhile, translates into English as: "The Emperor is divine and cannot be defiled."<sup>79</sup> This element ties the work directly to Japan's act of censorship, justified for these very reasons. Both of these elements are also linked to Japan's understanding of their emperor a sacred figure who was supposed to be the embodiment of the nation, its origins, and its eternal stability. The satirical message in this work hinges on the contrast between these different motifs on the screen and the threatening figure that Gropper depicts behind it: a very different kind of Hirohito than the one depicted on the screen.

According to the editorial staff at *New Masses*, this satire was created to reveal "the murderous face of Japanese Imperialism ... as it really is."<sup>80</sup> The screen was a composite representation of nationalistic rhetoric exploited by the Japanese government to justify continued actions against China, as well as any entity (like Gropper and *Vanity Fair*) that criticized them.

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<sup>78</sup> During the late nineteenth century, Japanese screens were widely collected in Europe and the U.S.

<sup>79</sup> My thanks to Dr. Mayu Fujikawa, Washington University alumna, who helped me with the translation.

<sup>80</sup>"Gropper vs. the Mikado," 3.

Gropper used the bifurcated composition and the screen itself—with its punning double meaning—to draw out contrasts between this rhetoric and the threat they actually imposed as Imperialist aggressors, to expose the nation as a dangerous threat. The figure behind the screen is meant to give vivid form to Japan as a militaristic, bellicose nation.

And yet these choices held other implications as well, for the caricature was not simply an exaggerated depiction of the emperor as an aggressor. Rather, Gropper drew on attributes and imagery from previous works to tie his notion of Japanese imperialism to the racial discourse of the Yellow Peril. He capitalized on key elements from his emblematic depiction of Japan as a samurai—such as the kimono and physiognomic distortions—to transform the emperor into a visibly exotic “Other.” He used the hair on his arms and the bloodied sword to make this man—who was diminutive in real life—seem primitive and aggressive. The end result re-imagines a leader that typically dressed in western uniforms for public photographs—regarded as a symbol of stability and order—into a barbaric warrior ready to attack at will. The fact that this caricature of Hirohito not only represents the emperor as “murderous,” but also as a visibly foreign threat, is significant, for it violates the very definition of the emperor to the Japanese people.

This choice suggests that the controversy around the *Vanity Fair* cartoon had taught the artist that the sovereign’s body was an especially charged subject for attack. As the representation of the nation, Hirohito more provocatively embodied Japanese imperialism than any of Gropper’s earlier representations of Japan. Drawing on charged racial elements, he was able to develop a memorable and malleable depiction of Japanese fascism as a distinctly foreign enemy—while also directly insulting the imperial ideal upon which Japanese nationalism was built.



Gropper's later works from this series largely draw on the same elements and similarly show Japanese in a more primitive and aggressive way. For example, an untitled 1936 satire in *New Masses* features Hirohito carrying a sword and a pistol; another satire entitled "The Far East" from 1938 shows the emperor with a rifle and a sword (fig. 4.17 and 4.18). The former caricature, made for an issue of *New Masses* devoted specifically to the global fascist threat, depicts Hirohito in his equestrian boots and pants, but also exoticizes him by depicting him in a kimono, its sash labeled "fascism" and "militarism." The latter focuses specifically on the Sino-Chinese War, and features Hirohito as a giant figure hovering over a globe, plunging his samurai sword into an area marked as "China." In this later work, Gropper uses this globe as a means to represent imperial appetite as well to chart out Pacific geography. The proximity of China to the U.S.S.R. on this globe serves to remind his leftist viewers, once again, of the broader fascist threat to Communism.

Notably, Hirohito's face and bodily features are even more distorted in these later works than they were in "The Mikado Behind the Japanese Screen." These works are representative of the shifts in the tone of caricatures more generally.<sup>81</sup> In both, Gropper has depicted him with bucked teeth and his unkempt hair. In "The Far East," Hirohito's sword-holding hand is particularly grotesque; in the 1936 work, the emperor's neck and ferocious expression appear especially unsettling. Iconographically, if not stylistically, this 1936 image closely resembles the picture of Japan from *Freiheit* in 1932, depicted as a monstrous beast (see fig. 4.11). In that earlier work, Gropper shows the creature running directly toward the viewer with his mouth wide open, as though ready to devour the victim. In the 1936 satire, the figure runs at an angle into the corner, but still generally in the viewer's direction. With his neck stretched taut, he also seems

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<sup>81</sup> For example, he also made a new version of his *Vanity Fair* satire for his 1938 satire that included a more distorted caricature of Hirohito.

ready to bite into his unseen victim. This satire is discomfiting not only for its directness and violent sensibility but also because his physiognomy is so jarringly inhuman. The glasses seem strange on a figure that otherwise looks more like a canine or a gorilla. For some viewers of this work, his features and gigantic scale may have brought to mind the fictional monster King Kong, who appeared on the silver screen in 1933—a particularly suggestive comparison because the plot of the movie revolved around the threat of a strange animal found on an island in the Pacific.<sup>82</sup>

This shift in tone between his *Vanity Fair* image and these works is dramatic. These later works, in fact, have more in common with images like Szyck's discussed in this chapter's introduction, an image that reduced the Japanese enemy into vermin. These images complicate familiar notions of the Popular Front, which is largely characterized in celebratory terms, as a progressive anti-fascist movement that combined the ideals of liberal democracy with a more radical belief in racial and social equality.<sup>83</sup> As a Communist sympathizer, moreover, Gropper was also known to be personally involved with issues of racial justice, and he held close friendships with several Japanese artists in New York, including left-leaning painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi. On the surface, these works seem to contradict these ideals, reducing the fascist threat in the Pacific into a racial stereotype. They lack the sophistication readily evident in the

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<sup>82</sup> As Angela Marie Smith has shown, themes of racial anxiety and eugenics played a role in a number of major horror films from the 1930s. See Angela Marie Smith, "Monsters in Bed: The Horror Film Eugenics of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*," in *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, ed. Christina Codgell and Susan Currell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 332-358. For the use of eugenics and race in comic books from the period, see Kerry Soper, "Classical Bodies versus Criminal Carnival: Eugenics Ideology in 1930s Popular Art," in *Popular Eugenics*, eds. Codgell and Currell, 269-307.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Verso, 1997). Denning's text is the most comprehensive study on the literary and film culture of the Popular Front to date.

work made for *Vanity Fair*. How can we reconcile these works as part of the Popular Front? How should we treat them within Gropper's broader oeuvre?

First, we can see these works as a direct response to Japan's demands for an apology: as a confrontational gesture that also served as Gropper's own declaration of freedom of artistic expression. In an interview with *Time* magazine from August 1935, he stated that he would reply to the Japanese government with a work that they would consider *really* "offensive."<sup>84</sup> These works rise to this challenge by turning their emperor into a barbaric man. But part of Gropper's goal, I argue, was also to create a memorable caricature that could stand in like a metonym for both the Japanese enemy and the imperialist ideology it promoted—something that would act like a shorthand symbol which, through repetition, would assume authority in the minds of his viewers and be seen as fact. Gropper, in other words, was developing what we might otherwise call a "stereotype" for Japanese fascism—an abstraction that over time seems real regardless of its relationship to any actual facts. Gropper's works include historical details, but also anachronistic and completely false elements. Notably, his amalgam of elements is only tied together by their "otherness."

According to Sander Gilman, who writes on stereotypes and race, the composite form that is loosely or not at all linked to reality can have a powerful effect on perceptions, especially if it is rooted in constructions of otherness from the person viewing the image. "Categories of difference are protean," he notes, "but they appear as absolutes. They categorize a sense of the self, but establish an order—the illusion of order in the world."<sup>85</sup> The racist references in these works are troubling and reveal a deep hypocrisy within the context of an anti-fascist movement

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<sup>84</sup> "Tintype of Divinity," 22

<sup>85</sup> Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 25.

rooted in the celebration of democracy and interracial equality. But I would also argue that they should be seen through Gilman's theories—as part of a broader attempt to define an abstract concept of fascism and to make its threat seem far more viscerally “real.” Gropper exploited racial prejudices and anxieties about the foreign other to make Japanese fascism seem like something completely at odds with American ideals.

We can also see these works in dialectical terms, as a reaction to fascist propaganda, and more specifically as part of an effort to thwart the spread of fascism in the U.S. This was a major concern of the Popular Front that confronted fascism in a number of ways, through editorials, fiction, and protests against violations of civil liberties such as the censorship of Diego Rivera's Rockefeller murals in 1933. Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), a novel about the emergence of a dictatorship in the U.S., is one of the more prominent testaments to these anxieties. Transformed into a film and a play, its popularity evinces how important this issue was for many during the period. This work was rooted in the idea that reactionary forces in the U.S. develop into a homegrown version of fascism that would be able to manipulate the media and other politicians, making them unstoppable. In an essay in *New Republic*, cultural critic Lewis Mumford gave a sense to the urgency of this concern: “Do not imagine that fascism will sweep over the world without touching America; every country contains morbid elements that will gladly harbor this disease.”<sup>86</sup>

These concerns were rooted in part in the fear that the U.S. government and the majority of the public were not taking the threats or the ominous tones of fascist sympathizers seriously. But they were also tied to a broader anxiety about the susceptibility of the mass public as well. Hitler's rapid rise to power evidenced the seductiveness of fascist ideology when supported

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<sup>86</sup> Lewis Mumford, as quoted in Langa, *Radical Art*, 170.

through a propaganda campaign that conflated the ideology with ideas of wholeness, stability, and purity. Germans seemed highly susceptible to propaganda like Lenie Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which exploited the use of montage to create a totalizing vision of the national body politic. In the U.S., one of the main anxieties revolved around the radio as a tool for mass manipulation, a technology exploited by conservatives like Father Coughlin, whose syndicated program reached millions. "On the radio we are purely receptive; more perfectly than anything heretofore invented, it satisfies a growing inclination for vicarious activity, for 'something doing' without doing it," wrote Ann O'Hare McCormick in a 1932 *New York Times* essay regarding this concern. "This passivity is a kind of measure of the electric movement in which we live and it is dazing, almost anesthetic effect upon the mind."<sup>87</sup>

Some leftist believed that the best response to these forms of propaganda was to make destabilizing or shocking works—"grotesque" imagery, literary critic Kenneth Burke argued, that could serve as a way to awaken popular audiences from the "trained incapacity," as he called it, engendered by mass communications.<sup>88</sup> Writing on this very issue in *New Masses* in 1937, Communist satirist Robert Forsythe explained that in the war against the seductive and totalizing rhetoric of fascism "humor is not enough." Nor, he explained, was the more biting language of satire and the attendant spirit of rebelliousness, the "the juvenile faith in the jocular," as he put it, so often wielded in the spirit of radical protest. "If you really want to do something with that great talent in humor," he explained, "learn at what point it is necessary to stick the stiletto in and twist it around!"<sup>89</sup> Forsythe advocated for a cruel language designed to hurt the enemy.

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<sup>87</sup> Ann O'Hare McCormick, "The Radio: A Great Unknown Force," *New York Times* (27 March 1932), SM1.

<sup>88</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 1935 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 7-10.

<sup>89</sup> Robert Forsythe, "Strictly from Anger," *New Masses* (August 3, 1937), 21.

Gropper's late caricatures of Hirohito with their unsettling allusions to cannibalism and violence can be seen as works that respond to this very idea.

Notably, one of the ways that scholars have treated satires like these is by dismissing them as inferior products resulting from overwork. This work lacks the subtlety and cleverness of the *Vanity Fair* image, and can for these reasons seem quickly "dashed off."<sup>90</sup> The implication is that his works were repetitious and derivative, and that their effectiveness as political satire, by extension, probably wore thin. While this point is understandable since these works can seem blatant, even simplistic, in hindsight, this line of argument misreads the purpose of these satires as works made for broader political campaign against fascism, as well as their role as published images viewed within a serial context with other texts and images. Such works needed to be bold to stand out among scores other images published in the mass media. Viewers also experienced them over the course of several years as events unfolded in the Pacific, in a period when the U.S. was still officially politically neutral. Gropper and his colleagues did not only want to vilify the enemy; they believed they needed to redefine it in more grotesque terms, in an effort to break down the idealizing rhetoric of fascist propaganda. Their art was created as a weapon in a communication campaign, aimed at dispelling the rhetoric of Hitler and Japanese nationalists like Araki, with his emphasis on racial purity and Japanese superiority.

Even though these kinds of works can be difficult to reconcile with understandings of the Popular Front as a progressive movement committed to ideas of democracy, liberty, and justice, they play an important role in our understanding of leftist art in the late 1930s. They speak to the sense of urgency and self-preservation that motivated the Popular Front efforts as the period

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<sup>90</sup> Although Hemingway does not mention these images specifically in his study on radical art he makes this basic claim, arguing that Gropper's motifs of "fascist leaders" became tired "through over-use." Hemingway, *Artists on the Left*, 105.

witnessed a series of events that would culminate in World War II. But these works also encouraged and promulgated negative stereotypes about the Japanese people at home and abroad. Works like these were powerful motivators; in the 1940s they became tools to justify acts of injustice against Japanese immigrants through the interment camps, and terrible violence against the Japanese abroad—including the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>91</sup> Gropper's works provide us with an important object lesson in the effects that the comic grotesque can have on conditioning social and political values.

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<sup>91</sup> There are countless examples of such works, including the caricature by Arthur Szyck, discussed in the introduction to this chapter; Theodor Geisel's numerous anti-Japanese cartoons, published in the Popular Front newspaper *PM*; and Thomas Hart Benton's anti-fascist painting series *The Year of Peril* (1942). For more on Theodor Geisel's work, see Richard H. Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* (New York: New Press, 1999). For more on Benton's work, specifically, see Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 115-126.

CHAPTER FOUR FIGURES



Figure 4.1. William Gropper, “Japanese Emperor Gets the Nobel Peace Prize,” from *Not On Your Tintype*, in *Vanity Fair* (August 1935).





Figure 4.2. William Gropper, *Not On Your Tintype*, in *Vanity Fair* (August 1935).

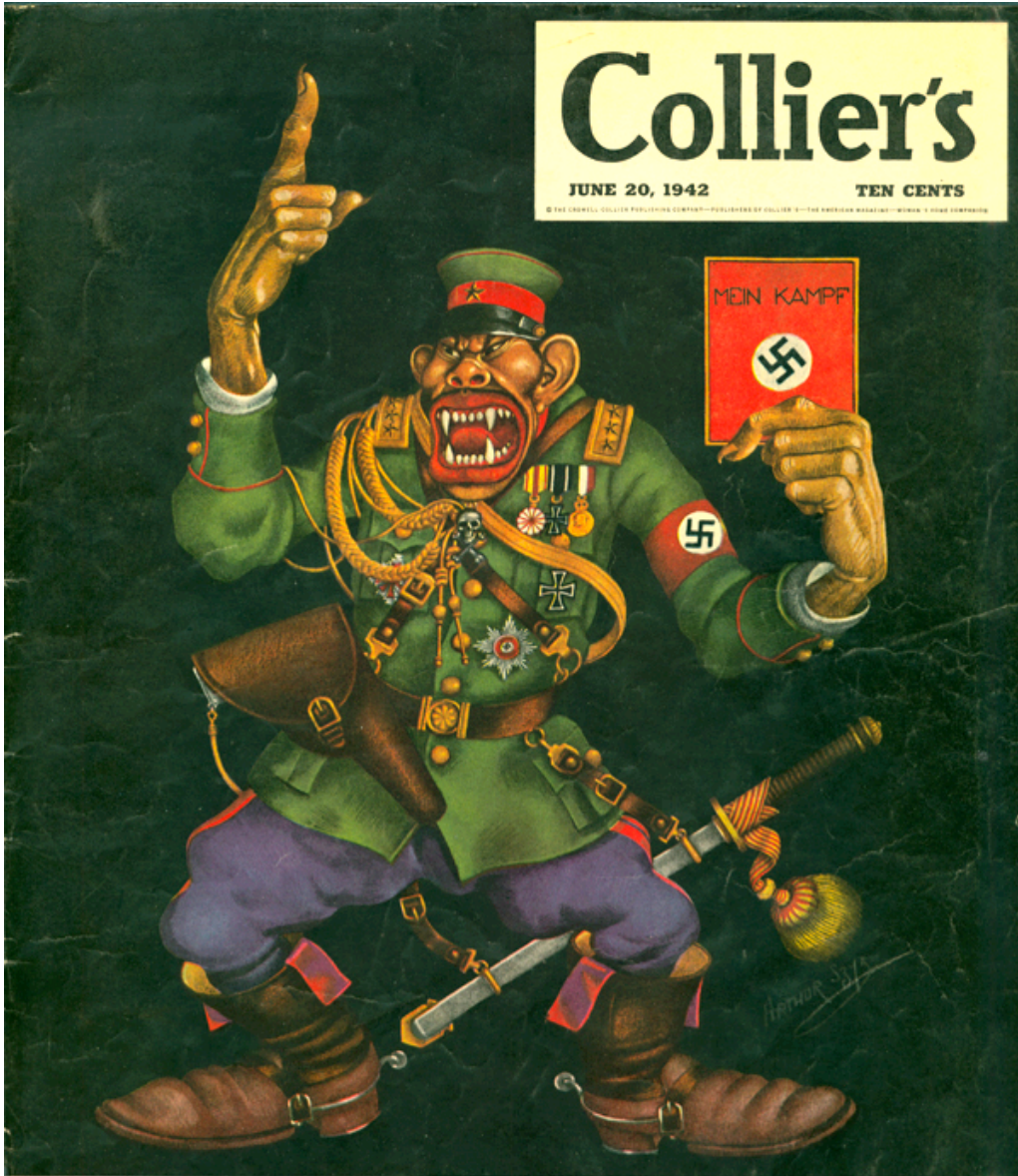
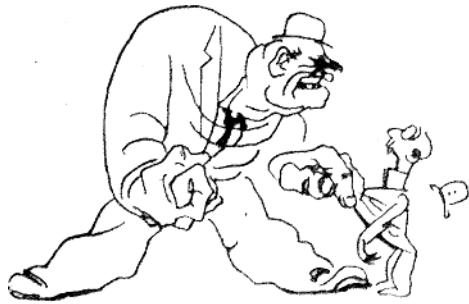


Figure 4.3. Arthur Szyck, Cover for *Collier's* (20 June 1942).



"Ah hah! So, you don't like this government, eh?"



"Now get the hell out-a-here!"



"Well, take that—"



"Can you beat it? Guys like that preaching violence!"



"You God-damn Bolshevik!"

## Law and Order

By William Gropper

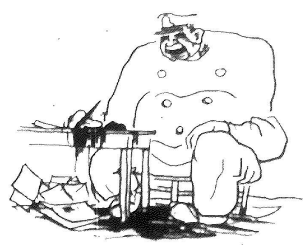
Figure 4.4. William Gropper, "Law and Order," *Liberator* (April 1920).



"Every guy in this joint is under arrest!"



"Clear the road there, boys—we got a dangerous Red."



"Come on! Come on! What's your name?"



Seditious Literature:  
The Bible.



Trying to convince the cops that they too are workingmen.

# Rounding Up The Reds

By William Gropper

Figure 4.5. William Gropper, "Rounding up the Reds," *Liberator* (February 1920), 39.

fourteen hours, forty-five minutes and thirty-two seconds. On June 22, the first Lindbergh child was born. Six weeks later Haven, Maine, the home of Senator Dought Morrow, Mrs. Lindbergh's father. By the end of 1930, the Lindberghs had flown 50,000 miles together.

■ June of 1931 saw them again in the air, this time on a most ambitious venture—a trip north to the Orient. Mrs. Lindbergh in her recent book has chronicled with a beauty of phrase worthy of Emily Dickinson, the story of the trip. It was an exciting and lonely excursion along the rimous days, into Kamchatka, Japan and Yangtze was in yellow and catastrophic flood, and the Lindberghs aided in relief work by charting the stricken areas from the air and flying drugs and serums to regions inaccessible except from the air. This expedition was brought to an end by two things, the loss of their plane in the silt-thick Yangtze and the death of Mrs. Lindbergh's father. The Lindberghs had travelled 15,000 miles. They returned to the United States by steanship and crossed the continent by air in a borrowed plane. During 1932 the Lindberghs flew very

little. That was the year of their tragedy. In the early part of 1933 they made another long inspection tour of transcontinental air channels. In July, they set forth on their most ambitious project—a survey of proposed North Atlantic air lines. Their object was not adventure but the assembling of trustworthy data on flying conditions and the practicability of commercial routes across the Atlantic. The journey reads like the chapter headings of an atlas. They flew together—to Labrador, and then across to Greenland where they made repeated flights over the ice cap and over treacherous territories never before surveyed. They went to Ireland and then to Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Denmark, Holland, England, France and Spain. Home ward bound, the Lindberghs hopped from Lisbon to the Azores, to Madeira, to the Cape Verde Islands, to the African coast, to the Cape Verde Islands, and back to Africa. Then on December 6 they took off for Natal, Brazil, eighteen hundred miles across the South Atlantic. They landed safely. On their return home, they took a casual jaunt up the Amazon River to Manaus. When they returned to the United States on December 19, they had visited twenty-one countries in 198 flying hours. During that time, they traversed nearly 30,000 miles of land and sea.

Heroes lead inhibited lives. The plaudits which greet them are fang-like to build a fire under an odd personality. The public hero usually becomes a professional. Lindbergh chose to become a recluse. He does not recognize its inevitability. It does not always at his heels but he must accept the situation. Colonel Lindbergh never has; his pressure upon him. No wire associations, however the Colonel feels about it, can take the chance of being linked on a story about Lindbergh. The Colonel's unwillingness to disclose his plans and his delight in outwitting reporters have resulted in a system of espionage which the papers find necessary and the Lindberghs find hateful and unfair.

■ Charles and Anne Lindbergh are not only extraordinary in their partnership—they are alone. In private life they have no friends of their own age and seek none. Since the tragedy at Hopewell, they have lived in Englewood, they share an apartment over the library and the Colonel is the Harry Guggenheim, the aviation enthusiast. His only cronies are and Henry Breckenridge, his lawyer; the rest of his acquaintances are friends of the Morrow. Recently he formed a rather prising friendship with Harold Nicolson, writer, diplomat and articulate British gentleman who is doing a biography of Senator Morrow. Mutual friends have described a dimer at the Morrow home—Nicolson dominating the conversation with his brilliant reminiscences of Lord Balfour's intemperate jiu-jitsu, and Lindbergh sitting attentive and for soup to desert.

■ Anne Lindbergh was the daughter of a wealthy Morgan partner, but she and her husband are still as modest in their taste as Sunday School picnicers. They fly with a bare eighteen pounds of luggage and they hate dressing up. The Colonel despises eve-

ing clothes, and rarely wears a boiled shirt. He has no small talk, reads little except technical books, and is deprecatory about his achievements because he does not consider himself an educated man. He and his wife eschew neither golf nor bridge, are bored by country clubs, play tennis very occasionally, and their acquaintances say, very badly. The Lindberghs, after tragedy, adventure, and six years of living together, are still self-contained and essentially unchanged. The Colonel's father was a conservative of the Coolidge stripe, a scholarly, doubling millionaire. Charles and Anne are separated from this present peripatetic world by the fact that they have no interest in economics. Recently, Colonel Lindbergh in a newspaper poll was suggested as a Presidential candidate. He was appalled by the idea, and groaned as the enthusiastic rural provinces were heard from. Lindbergh is not a modest man; he is not even (on occasion) a very kindly or courteous man, but he does gauge accurately his own limitations. He would not accept a Presidential nomination because he realizes that he has no qualifications for the job. Heroes seldom have. Heroes seldom know it.

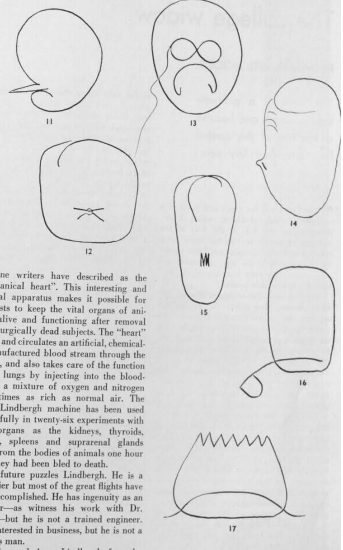
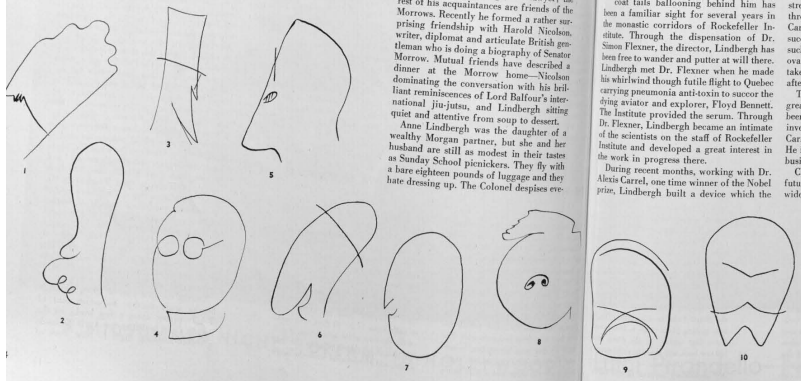
■ Lindbergh's rangy figure, vestless, his out tails ballooning behind him has been a familiar sight for several years in the monastic corridors of Rockefeller Institute. Through the dispensation of Dr. Simon Flexner, the director, Lindbergh has been free to wander and putter at will there. Lindbergh met Dr. Flexner when he made his whirlwind though futile flight to Quebec carrying pneumonia anti-toxin to succor the dying aviator and explorer, Floyd Bennett. The Institute provided the serum. Through Dr. Flexner, Lindbergh became an intimate of the scientists on the staff of Rockefeller Institute and developed a great interest in the work in progress there.

During recent months, working with Dr. Alexis Carrel, one time winner of the Nobel prize, Lindbergh built a device which the

headline writers have described as the "mechanical heart". This interesting and unusual apparatus makes it possible for scientists to keep the vital organs of animals alive and functioning after removal from surgically dead subjects. The "heart" pumps and circulates an artificial, chemically manufactured blood stream through the organs, and also takes care of the function of the lungs by injecting into the blood stream a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen three times as rich as normal air. The Carrel-Lindbergh machine has been used successfully in twenty-six experiments with such organs as the kidneys, thyroids, ovaries, spleens and suprarenal glands taken from the bodies of animals one hour after they had been bled to death.

The future puzzles Lindbergh. He is a great flier but most of the great flights have been accomplished. He has ingenuity as an inventor—as witness his work with Dr. Carrel—but he is not a trained engineer. He is interested in business, but he is not a business man.

Charles and Anne Lindbergh face the future, still young despite their world wide fame. They face the future—together.



**Celebrated faces of our time—do you recognize them?**

• In this flow of caricature, Frank Dunn eliminates everything from the faces of seventeen great men, except what they look like. Five of the faces are no longer with us, but they ought to be as familiar to us as ever. Study them all carefully, and see if you've forgotten whose they are. If you have, these names will refresh your memory: 1. Albert Einstein; 2. George Bernard Shaw; 3. Woodrow Wilson; 4. Father Coughlin; 5. Franklin Roosevelt; 6. Al Smith; 7. Jim Farley; 8. Harry Long; 9. Hugh Johnson; 10. Charles E. Hughes; 11. Cal Coolidge; 12. Herbert Hoover; 13. "Teddy" Roosevelt; 14. The Prince of Wales; 15. Hitler; 16. Charles G. Dawes; 17. Paul von Hindenburg.

Figure 4.6. Frank Dunn, "Celebrated Faces," in *Vanity Fair* (1935).

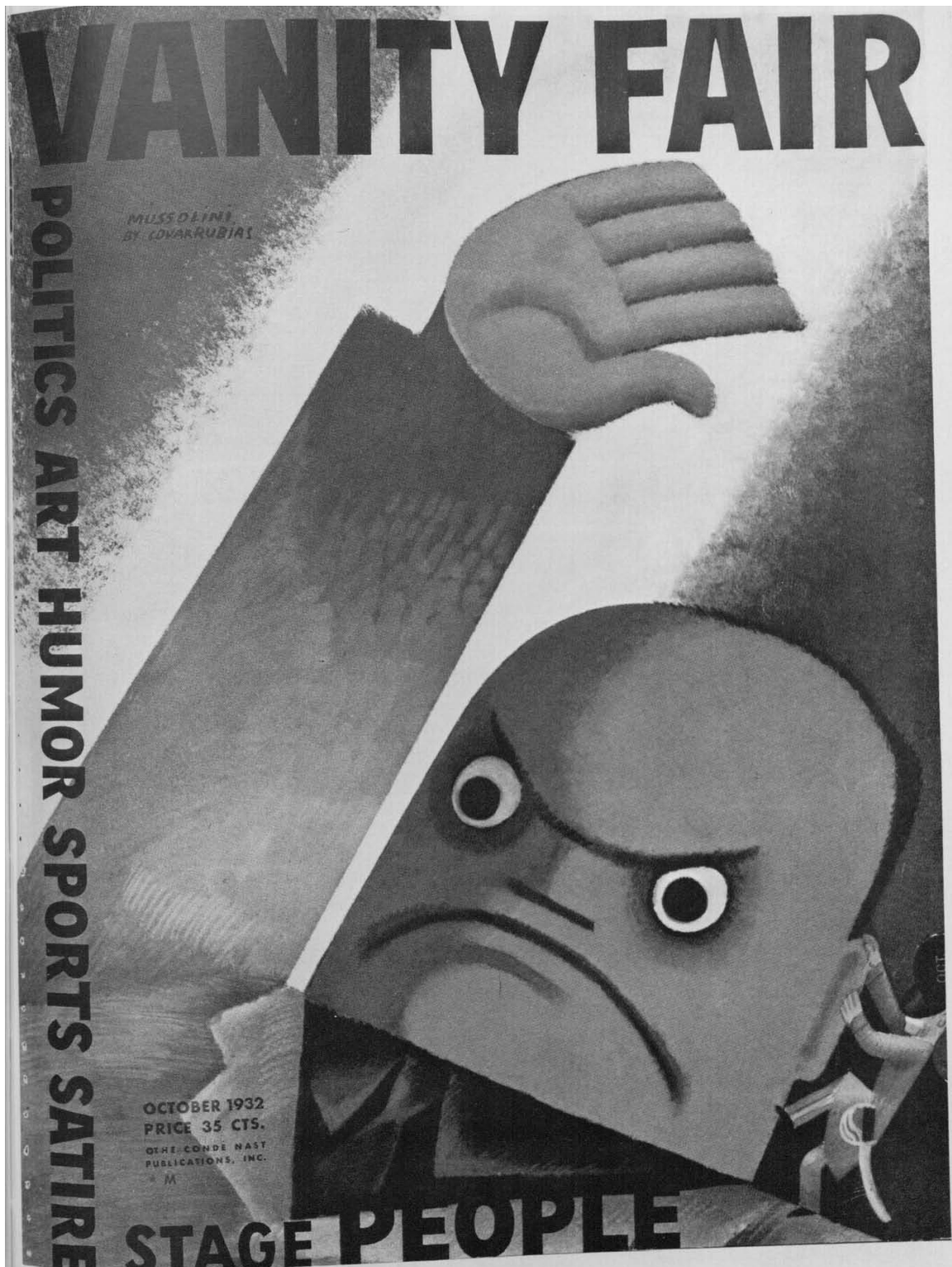


Figure 4.7. Miguel Covarrubias, Cover Image, *Vanity Fair* (October 1932).

# AGAIN THE EMPEROR DECIDES FOR JAPAN

By GEORGE E. BOKOLSKY

**P**OLITICIANS and militarists may quarrel in Japan; General Honjo may flout Baron Shidehara; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may promise that the advance in Manchuria has ceased, only to face another march of Japanese troops and another bombing of a Chinese city—these, in Japan, are the mere details of the imperfections of government. Perfection alone is with the Emperor, Hirohito, 124th in an unbroken line which began with Jimmu Tenno 2,000 years ago.

Experts, Ministers of State, authorities on the details of the situation, have been called to the Imperial Palace. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has set forth its policy of friendship and conciliation with China; the Ministry of War has pointed out the dangers to the realm, to the necessity of maintaining unimpaired the first line of defense of the Japanese Empire. And more important perhaps than the actual officials of the government have been Baron Makino, head of the Imperial Household Department, and Prince Salongi, last survivor of a group of powerful personalities whom the Emperor's grandfather, Meiji, designated as Elder Statesmen to advise and assist his successors.

For the Emperor Hirohito alone must decide whether Japanese troops shall be sent out of Japan. He alone guards the boundaries of the empire. For it is his realm that is endangered; his household that may topple; his children who may become homeless. Japan is a constitutional monarchy, but above and beyond the Constitution is the duty of the Emperor to preserve the land which almost 2,000 years of ancestors bequeathed to him. No Parliamentary Diet, no Premier, no Minister of War or of Foreign Affairs can share with him his moral responsibilities to his ancestors—dead perhaps to the Western world, living to him as he is alive, for the line is unbroken and alive from Jimmu to Hirohito—one line of God-descended men whose duty it is to find peace and plenty for the Yamato race (as the Japanese refer to themselves.)

Thus, before a final decision with regard to Manchuria could be reached by the government, the Cabinet turned to the Emperor—not as they might have done in other lands, to the people. For, whereas the details of government, budgets, taxes, personalities in control of office, may be referred to the people for decision at a general election, the continued existence of Japan is the obligation of the Emperor. And his obligation is not to those who may follow him, but to those who preceded him.

**A**MINISTER of State may make mistakes in policy, but if his errors cause the Emperor chagrin, he shall not further bring sorrow to the Emperor by asking him to sit in judgment; rather by his own hand shall he wipe out his name and his family. In automatic acknowledgment of his evil conduct, he shall remove himself from the face of the earth. And he does.

To the Westerner, the sentiment of a Japanese toward his Emperor is often incomprehensible. We respect, we revere, we honor kings and rulers; but the Japanese adores his Emperor. For, after 2,000 years

## In the Manchurian Crisis Hirohito Exercises a Power That Has Endured Through Changing Forms of the State

from man or nature. From Jimmu Tenno to Hirohito Tenno, from Julius Caesar to the League of Nations, the family of the present Emperor of Japan has ruled his country.

**H**IROHITO does not derive his power from the Constitution of Japan. He rules because he is descended, in the minds of the Japanese people, from the Sun Goddess and a line of Kami, godlike

The Constitution in no way limited the sovereignty or authority of the Emperor. There was to be a Parliament, the Diet, consisting of two houses—one the House of Peers, appointed by the Emperor, the other, the Commons, now elected by universal suffrage. The Cabinet is responsible to the Emperor alone, although it may go out of office if it lacks a majority in the Diet, but that is actually as the Emperor wishes to interpret the

question of war or peace without the direct consent of the Emperor.

Meiji was a remarkable man and he surrounded himself with remarkable men. When he died, a group of these leaders were constituted the Genro, or elder statesmen, to assist Yoshihito Tenno, the present Emperor's father, to govern. The last of the Genro, Prince Salongi, is performing this duty for Hirohito. At a crucial moment, in a critical situation, the Emperor

largely because it adopted a system of selling honors to finance a program.

To the Emperor of Japan a Chinese classic, the Hsiao Kt Book of Filial Piety, became the constitutional foundation conduct. "He who serves his parents in a high situation will be free from pride; in a low situation will be free from contumacy; among his equals will not be quarrelsome." Thus, Hirohito is guarded by his people with awe, but not in fear; judges and lawyers may mete out punishment, but the Emperor will do justice; officials may tax the people, but the Emperor will protect them.

Politicians, soldiers, statesmen Japan, as in other Oriental countries, seldom evoke enthusiasms among the people, who regard the exploiters and tricksters. But the Japanese people feel that they are protected against these selfish men by the Emperor's exclusive power to decide when and how many his subjects shall be used for his purposes outside the realm.

### II

**H**IROHITO was born on April 29, 1901, the eldest son of the Emperor Yoshihito, who had ascended the throne in 1912. For fourteen years Yoshihito reigned but toward the end he was stricken with illness, and he could not perform the duties of his office; the Hirohito became Regent.

Hirohito was educated at the Peers' School in Tokyo with his brothers, Chichibu and Takamatsu. At school he was most strictly disciplined, rising each morning at 6 o'clock, spending his first hours in ablutions and prayers—prayers of his ancestors who are dead and his parents, who were alive. He had developed an interest in Chinese literature and photography, Japanese fencing, horseback riding and gymnastics. Among his principal tutors was Admiral Togo, who had been so important a factor in winning the Russo-Japanese War. The tale is told of Hirohito, which perhaps contributes to an understanding of his character, that as a boy his favorite poem was the following: *The Light of the sun and the moon withhold no favors; They shine upon all equally.*

In 1921 he sailed for Europe on six months' trip, breaking all precedents that members of the imperial family never leave Japan. (Since then, however, his brothers have traveled abroad, making long trips around the world.) In England Hirohito formed a friendship with the Prince of Wales—which caused much astonishment in Japan. While he was Prince Regent, Hirohito, in emulation of the Prince of Wales came closer to his people than any Japanese ruler had done before.

**I**T was immediately after the European trip that the condition of his father required Hirohito to assume the burdens of the regency. The transition from the popular Prince, traveling abroad, receiving acclaim in foreign countries, to the effective ruler of his country was so rapid that the Japanese people still thought of him as the dashing young man. His marriage to Princess Nagako Kuni was in keeping with Japanese traditions, which his brother Chichibu broke when he married Miss Setsuko Matusudaira, a commoner who had been born in



"No Law Makes Him Emperor, for He Is the Law."

Photo From Underwood & Underwood.

ancestors who have also ruled Japan; he rules, they hold, not by grace of God, but because he himself is of the godhood. No law makes of him Emperor, for he is the law; he is the organized will of the State.

situation. Many checks were placed upon the Diet to prevent it from impairing the authority of the Emperor; for instance, there is the provision that the political system cannot be changed except by order of the Emperor.

sends for the aged Prince and consults him, because it was the Emperor Meiji's wish. The Genro have no place in the Japanese Constitution; yet because it was the Emperor Meiji's plan that they should be consulted, they transcended the

Figure 4.8. Equestrian Portrait of Emperor Hirohito, as published in 1931 *New York Times* article.



Figure 4.9. William Gropper, "Keep Up the Attack on the Soviet Union!" *Freiheit* (16 May 1932).



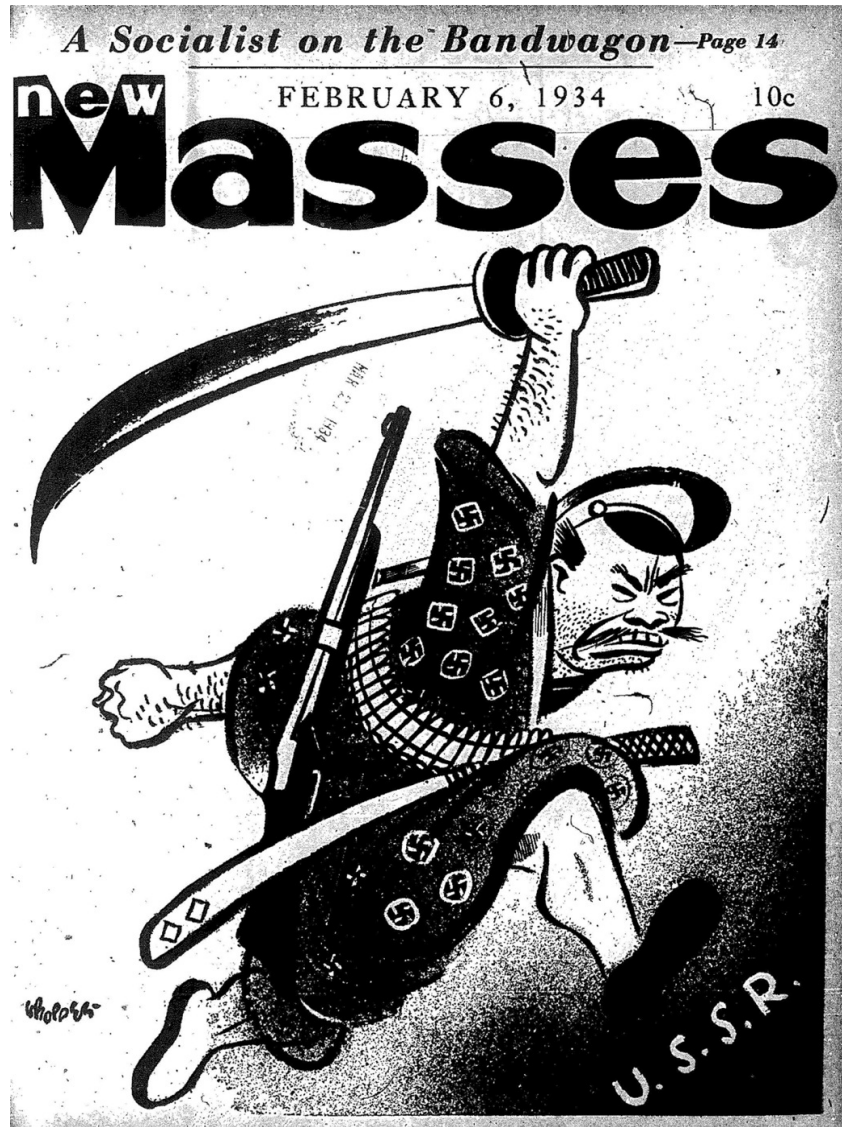


Figure 4.10. William Gropper, Untitled, *New Masses* (February 1934).



Figure 4.11. Herman Knackfuss, *People of Europe, Guard Your Dearest Goods*, engraving of painting commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm, circulated globally in newspapers, 1895.



Figure 4.12. Jacob Burck, "Coolie Works Act," in *Hunger and Revolt*, 1934.

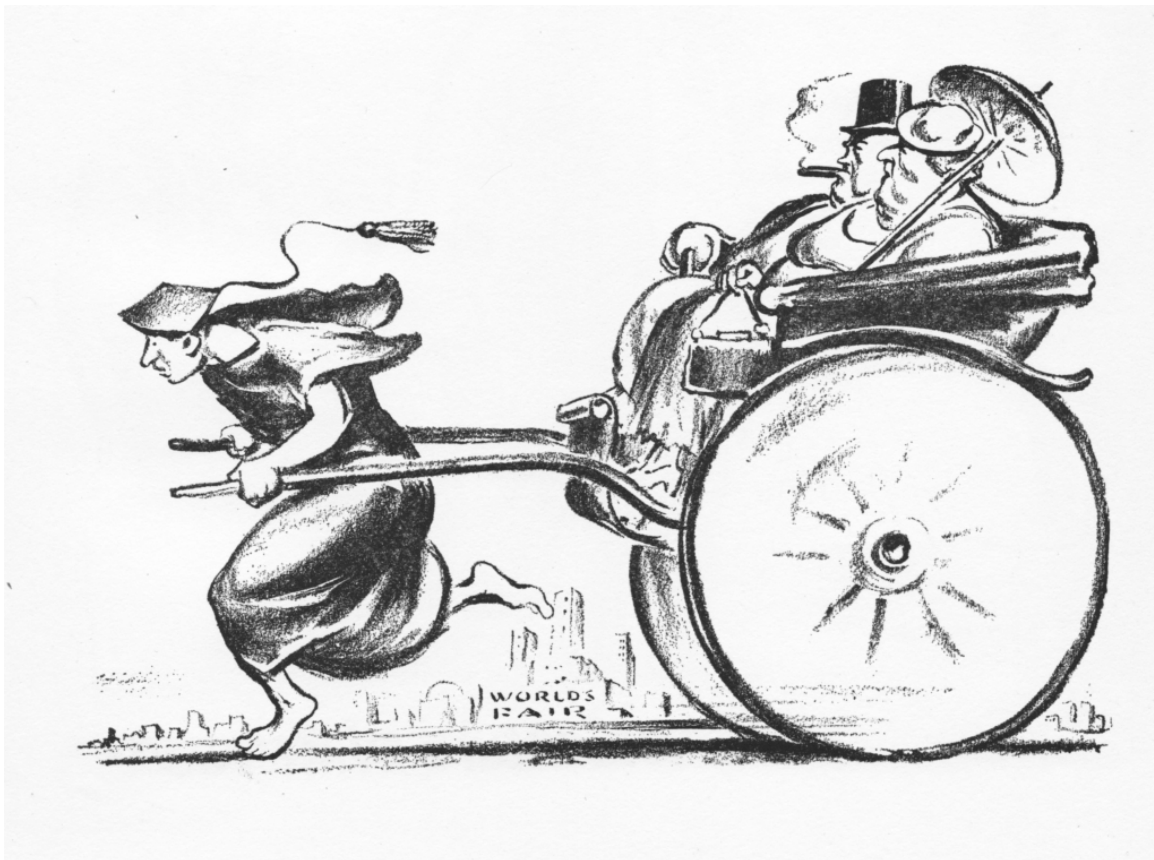


Figure 4.13. Jacob Burck, "A Century of Progress" in *Hunger and Revolt*, 1935.



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With the invention of the jinrikisha the aristocracy of Nippon turned from the carrier-borne *norimono* and *kago* to the silent, swift and more luxurious wheeled vehicle

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one great item of ownership expense. The Packard owner knows that the beauty of his car remains ever modern—that by keeping his Packard a little longer, he enjoys *luxurious transportation* at ordinary car cost.

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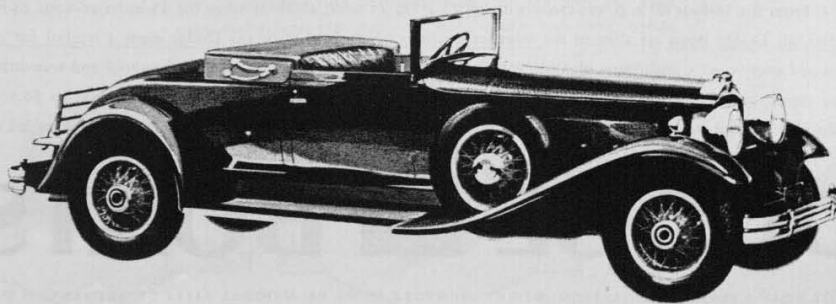


Figure 4.14. Advertisement for Packard Cars, in *Vanity Fair* (1930).

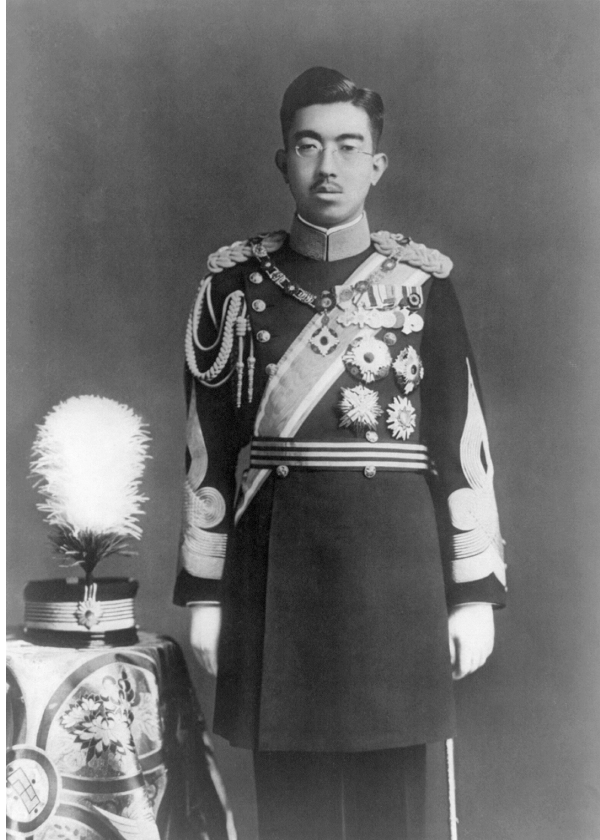


Figure 4.15. Press photograph of Emperor Hirohito, c. 1935.



Figure 4.16. William Gropper, "The Mikado Behind the Japanese Screen," *New Masses* (13 August 1935).



Figure 4.17. William Gropper, *Untitled*, in *New Masses* (March 1936).





Figure 4.18. William Gropper, "The Far East," 1938.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown, through a series of case studies, how artists in a period of economic, cultural, and political crisis deployed disruptive images of the body to confront idealizing constructions of the body politic embedded in debates around governance, citizenship, leadership, recovery, and progress. These disruptive bodily forms undermined efforts to repress social anxieties about middle-class gender expectations, mocked attempts to smooth over political turbulence, and belittled the totalizing construction of society embedded within many of the debates in the period around society, citizenship, and progress. I have also shown how artists exploited familiar body types—such as the soldier, the worker, or the emperor—to forge their critiques. The artists in this dissertation took advantage of the symbolic power of these figural types as an entry point for interrogating broader political and social systems.

But these artists did not only treat the body as a metaphorical tool in their images. In almost all of the works I examine, the artists adopted the strategy of the comic grotesque as a way to connect to viewers on a visceral level, with the goal of destabilizing perceptions and engendering a new understanding of the relationships between the individual and the larger world. More fundamentally, these artists treated *somatic experience* as the very basis for awakening consciousness and creating broader social and political resistance.<sup>1</sup> As leftist theorist Henri Barbeusse argued in relationship to Jacob Burck's political satires, the comic grotesque was “not only something which takes place at a remote distance from your own body, it also touches you and trails after you, and...forces you, for good or for evil to play your role in this

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<sup>1</sup> The relative success of each artist in this endeavor is debatable. However, as the different case studies demonstrate, in many instances published responses to the works indicate that at the very least, the artists succeeded in disturbing audiences. Regardless, the disruptive intentions of these artists on their own terms, are important, I argue, because they constitute an understanding of the self rooted in human vulnerability, and an understanding of society that is productively dynamic, ambivalent, and unstable.

sad, collective melee.”<sup>2</sup> This unerring insistence on embodied experiences designed to destabilize, provoke, or outrage, I contend, is precisely what made the comic grotesque so effective as a form of critique in the U.S. in a period of such dramatic social and political upheaval.

Most of the works in this dissertation were created with the explicit goal of unsettling their viewers, regardless of their specific politics. Some of these satires, like James Thurber’s narratives of thwarted furtive men and looming women, exploited narrative structures and evocative pictorial techniques that would have elicited associations with period understandings of anxiety disorders and nervous breakdowns.<sup>3</sup> Others, like Jacob Burck’s “Roosevelt’s Offer to the Veterans,” include cringe-inducing juxtapositions that were widely affiliated with violence and pain (see fig. 3.1). Gropper’s caricature of Emperor Hirohito is a satire that blasphemes a figure who was equivalent to a god in Japan, but the short, stumpy body Gropper depicts also draws uncomfortable associations to bodily imperfection. The distorted and broken bodies in many of the satires in this dissertation materialized the physical and psychological risks of an ideal of political citizenship that prioritized duty to the nation over any other obligations or desires. Robert Minor’s arresting depiction of the “Perfect Soldier” is an especially jarring critique of this ideal: a monstrous vision of the soldier-citizen that is both giant and imposing, and headless and static (see fig. 1.1).

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Barbeusse, as discussed in Chapter Three, was speaking about a collection of works by Burck that were originally published in *The Daily Worker*, and were later compiled in the anthology *Hunger and Revolt*. See Henri Barbeusse, “Introduction,” in Jacob Burck, *Hunger and Revolt: Cartoons by Burck* (New York: Daily Worker, 1935), 7.

<sup>3</sup> More explicitly, as Chapter Two argues, Thurber used techniques that were evocative of automatic drawing, which was tied to psychotherapy; his depictions of threatening women can be tied to Freud’s Oedipal complex.

In a period in American history when businesses and governments invoked more mechanized conceptions of the human body to either celebrate American progress and strength, or encourage greater productivity, this interest in somatic responses was quite profound. The twinge or shudder one might experience, the sick feeling in the stomach, or the bitter taste that fills in the mouth when one sees something macabre—these are all instinctual physical reactions that operate outside the arena of self-control or rational action. In 1917, *The Masses* patron Amos Pinchot warned that in debates around the modern nation state, there lurked a strong desire to “mould the United States into an efficient, orderly nation, economically and politically controlled by those who know what is good for the people.”<sup>4</sup> The comic grotesque was a strategy of satirical critique that constituted a complete negation in this kind of ideology. It replaced constructions of the modern society forged in ideals of a strong nation state and dutiful citizens with a radical alternative rooted in disruption and human vulnerability.

Notably, my initial interest in this subject emerged from my *own* visceral reactions to the graphic satires made in this period. Even though I had no experience with Great Depression era debates around government work programs nor any knowledge of social perceptions of disabilities in that period, I could not shake the unnerving image that Burck created of an amputated soldier holding wielding an axe (see fig. 3.1). Even though I am a century removed from the debates around WWI, I am still repulsed and disturbed by the macabre display of guts that Sloan invoked in his anti-war critique (see fig. 1.2). My own experiences as the daughter of two Vietnam-era veterans, living in the U.S. in the twenty-first century—a period marked by its own debates about war, government oversight, and the treatment of veterans (and one also

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<sup>4</sup> Amos Pinchot, quoted in David Holloway, “Visualizing Dissent in World War I: Modernism, and the End of ‘Liberal’ Progressivism, in Art from *The Masses* (1911-1917),” in *American Visual Cultures*, ed. John Beck and David Holloway (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 66.

marked by a greater social acceptance of disability)—inherently informs my specific views towards these images. And yet the very fact that the works in this dissertation still resonate on a fundamental level—a level, significantly, that requires no political knowledge or opinion of my own—speaks to how the comic grotesque can act as a form of *communal* engagement.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin insisted that we see the grotesque in collective terms—as a force that operates within the “extra-official life of the people.” “The boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery within time and space,” he wrote, “extends to all languages, all literatures, and the entire system of gesticulation.”<sup>5</sup> Everyone’s experiences with grotesque images may differ; our race, class, gender, age, and physical abilities shape our particular experiences.<sup>6</sup> Yet we all begin with our embodied reactions, from which our responses, opinions, and actions derive. The comic grotesque is a form of critical engagement that thwarts the authority of language, ideology, and the law as well as the power dynamics that go with it. It is a form of engagement, in this respect, that derives from connectedness.<sup>7</sup>

In the U.S. during the 1930s, many of the artists in this dissertation invoked the shared experience of the body with the goal of incurring communal outrage towards unjust systems. It became the very basis for political resistance. But it is important within this context to also understand that their views of embodied experience were embedded within the period’s cultural and social norms. Thurber’s challenges to cultural expectations of middle-class manhood exploited anxieties about gender relationships in a period when women were making significant

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<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), 319.

<sup>6</sup> To name one obvious example, my position as a white woman living after third-wave feminism (and someone who identifies as a feminist, at that) informs my experience with Thurber’s cartoons of nervous men. Yet nonetheless, the cartoonist’s strategies to unsettle the viewer—to render the familiar strange—are still affecting.

<sup>7</sup> In many of his writings, Bakhtin grounds subjectivity in dialogical relationships. For more, see Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 15.

political and social gains. Gropper channeled period anxieties among the working class tied to the sociopolitical discourse of the Yellow Peril to forge an enemy in his works that was at once marked as barbaric, violent, and dangerous. Notably, Gropper's attacks on Japanese fascism anticipate the state-sanctioned use of grotesque racial caricatures during WWII represented in Arthur Szyck's abrasive caricature of a Japanese soldier published in *Collier's* in 1942 (see fig. 4.3). In the 1940s, these works became tools to justify terrible acts of violence against the Japanese abroad, and injustices committed against Japanese immigrants at internment camps. Thurber's aggressive women, meanwhile, anticipate the conflicted images of women during the Cold War as duplicitous villains in film noir, or as humorous grotesques in Abstract Expressionist artist Willem de Kooning's well-known *Woman* series. These images signaled a deep ambivalence towards women tied to a conflicting desire for control and loss of control in a period in which the values of containment and conformity were deeply entrenched.

One of the legitimate concerns around the comic grotesque as framework for political engagement is that the agitating language can have dangerous consequences. The recent January 2015 attack by religious extremists on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* makes frighteningly clear the risks of publishing provocative satire designed explicitly to offend sensibilities. It is important to recognize that the artists in this dissertation never experienced the same kind of threat as the ten staffers at the newspaper who lost their lives to jihadist gunmen. These gunmen exploited the offensive nature of the material at the magazine, which often included racist caricatures of Arab Muslims, to justify their terrorist acts.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is also important

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<sup>8</sup> As a number of commentators have pointed out, the blasphemous, mocking images of Muhammed target marginalized communities in France that already endure xenophobia sanctioned by the French government, which bans headscarves and burqas. But as *Slate* journalist Jordan Weissman argues, free speech allows us condemn the obvious racism within such works while still defending the right make

to recognize that the artists in this dissertation *did* face risks nonetheless for confronting policies and political ideologies that they believed to be repressive. In 1917, the U.S. government shut down *The Masses* for its anti-war satire and writings and its staff stood criminal trial.<sup>9</sup> Henry Glintenkamp, who made “Perfect Fit” for *The Masses*, fled to live in Mexico for seven years after voicing his opposition and declaring himself a conscientious objector to the draft.<sup>10</sup> The Japanese government censored Gropper’s caricature of Hirohito in 1935 and made coded threats to the U.S. government.<sup>11</sup>

Given these factors, it is tempting to argue that the comic grotesque (or intentionally provocative graphic satire, more generally) is ineffective as a form of political or social engagement. In response to the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, specifically, some have questioned the purpose of making works so obviously designed to offend.<sup>12</sup> However, I would argue that the

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such works in the first place. Jordan Weissman, “Charlie Hebdo is Heroic *and* Racist,” *Slate*, 8 January 2015, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2015/01/charlie\\_hebdo\\_the\\_french\\_satirical\\_magazine\\_is\\_heroic\\_it\\_is\\_also\\_racist.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/01/charlie_hebdo_the_french_satirical_magazine_is_heroic_it_is_also_racist.html).

<sup>9</sup> The staffers under attack by the U.S. government would have been imprisoned if the two criminal trials did not end in hung juries. See John Sayers, “Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression: *The Masses* Magazine Versus the Government, 1917-1918,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 32, no. 1 (January 1988), 42–78.

<sup>10</sup> Glintenkamp’s experiences, of course, also speak to broader efforts to police political dissent in the late 1910s. The most egregious example is the Palmer Raids of 1919-20, led by U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, which led to more than 500 foreign citizens being deported for their radical political positions.

<sup>11</sup> There are numerous other examples in these years in which agencies or organizations attempted to censor satire. Attempts to censor *The Masses* on moral grounds are mentioned in Chapter One. During the first two years of *New Masses*, editors bragged regularly about groups that tried, unsuccessfully, to shut them down.

<sup>12</sup> The recent attack on a cartoonist in Copenhagen has also spurred these debates. Some have argued that all “offensive” free speech be censored; others have tried to censor terrorist “hate” speech specifically in the wake of the attacks. Right after the attacks in Paris, *New York Times* editorial board offered an eloquent defense of free speech that raises important questions about the practicalities of such attempts. The Editorial Board, “Wrong Responses to Charlie Hebdo,” *New York Times* (15 January 2015) <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/opinion/after-paris-attacks-wrong-responses-to-charlie-hebdo.html>. For an example of how these debates are playing out globally, see Henry McDonald, “Sale of Charlie Hebdo in Ireland will Test Blasphemy Law for First Time,” *The Guardian*, 5 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/05/charlie-hebdo-ireland-blasphemy-law-image-of-prophet>.

very existence of these debates demonstrate, in profoundly relevant terms, how critical provocative satire is to civic engagement. The comic grotesque challenges, provokes, and troubles ideologies. But, as speech rights activist Jodie Ginsberg argues in a recent editorial in *The Guardian* about the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, this space of discomforting ambivalence is vital to free society.<sup>13</sup>

The grotesque is an attitude towards the world in which all official certainties are made relative.<sup>14</sup> This process of destabilization is what makes the works in this dissertation so powerful. Yes, this process occurs within the realm of art, not policy; and yes, policies and laws are a critical component to social change. But so is political consciousness. The comic grotesque has the potential to reshape critical awareness and open up new ways of seeing the world around us. The artists in this dissertation confronted the confining imagery of their own period with deformations and jarring references that engaged with a more unstable and somatic understanding of society and the self. In an era marked by sustained crises, this form of critical engagement was a vital life-affirming presence.

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The Irish Republic is the only nation in Europe to have introduced censorship laws in the twenty-first century.

<sup>13</sup> Ginsberg asks those who consider policing satire to think seriously about the nature of censorship itself. “The fact that I find them offensive or anger-inducing cannot, and should never, be used as an excuse for shutting down their speech,” she argues. “If the reaction to the latest attack is that there are no more debates about free expression, no more speech that one or other person finds offensive, then the result will not be less offensive speech, it will be no speech at all,” she concludes. See Jodie Ginsberg, “The Right to Free Speech Means Nothing without the Right to Offend,” *The Guardian*, 16 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/16/free-speech-means-nothing-without-right-to-offend-paris-copenhagen>.

<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin refers to this as “gay relativity” in his discussion of the grotesque. See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, especially 20-24. For a discussion on this concept and its greater symbolic meaning, see Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, 68.





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