Book Review

JOHN WOODFORD

The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation, by Brian Dolinar. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012. $60 hardcover; $34 Amazon online. *Reviewed by John Woodford.*

An incident erupts: perhaps an atrocity against a black youth by the police or racists, or corrupt prosecutors and judges convict yet another innocent black defendant, or the US bombs, invades, or otherwise joins in suppressing a foreign nation fighting a US-supported dictator.

Now imagine that in response to such events, celebrities like Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Derek Jeter, Denzel Washington, Gabby Douglas, Bernard Hopkins, Oprah Winfrey, Jamie Foxx, Henry Louis Gates, Gwen Ifill, Wynton Marsalis, and Walter Mosley participated in a progressive popular front that held rallies attended by 30,000 to 100,000 in strategic major cities to demand justice and combat abuses of power.

That sort of fight-back was the norm in many Afro-American communities for much of the 1930s into the 1950s, and it took the weight of the bourgeois political, economic, and police machine to disrupt the unity that progressives had forged. Few high school or college courses provide any details about that epoch in US history. Concealing and/or distorting information about the era in which fronts played key roles has become part of the opinion-molding techniques of the neoliberal and right-wing establishment.

That is why University of Illinois historian Brian Dolinar's *The Black Cultural Front* deserves a wide reading today, when the question of how to form popular fronts to attain or restore grassroots power is on the agenda of scholars and activist groups in Europe and Asia as well as the Americas.

Dolinar unearths the long-buried story of how African-American cultural and political figures allied with the country's communist, socialist, and liberal activists to influence politics and decision-makers at all levels. The issues the front tackled included lynching, segregation, legal inequality, immigration rights, and the imperialistic use of American might.

Dolinar shines a penetrating light on the achievements of black men and women who jeopardized their careers to build a broad united front that learned through struggle how to define its political goals and attain them. And a penetrating light is definitely needed because mainstream US historians

John Woodford grew up in Benton Harbor, Michigan. After earning his BA and MA in English literature at Harvard University, he entered the field of journalism, first at *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. He joined *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper in 1968 and served as executive editor there from 1969 to 1972. After copy editor positions at the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *New York Times,* he wrote and edited for *Ford Times* and the *Ann Arbor Observer* before becoming an executive editor for the University of Michigan, where he ran the school's feature publication, *Michigan Today,* for twenty years, until his retirement in 2005.

have cast a shroud of group-think, knee-jerk ideological fog over the individuals and organizations he describes.

The party line—and it is a decidedly right-wing party line that most American reactionaries and too many liberals stick to—is that the most effective anti-racism activists in the period Dolinar covers were Communist Party agents, "fellow travelers," or dupes of the reds. As such, their unity dissolved because their alien masters could not appreciate the special concerns of black America. Socialist ideology and class-based organizing were depicted as inherently un-American, and hence the US would provide only infertile soil for those who wished to home-grow a united front that led to a working-class party.

Using original source material in a meticulous but dramatically effective narrative, Dolinar arrives at a different explanation of why the popular front of the era he covers broke up. The key agents of disunity were not the reds but the manifold assault by the right-wing establishment. The US ruling class used opinion-molding red-scare and red-baiting campaigns in the mass media and culture. It enacted, via the two Big Business parties, laws aimed at immigrant rights, the rights to unionize, and the right to publicly express communist beliefs and still hold on to teaching jobs and so on. It employed police-state tactics, such as planting informers in groups to sow discord, spy on meetings, and conduct conspicuous stake-outs in front of targets' homes. That—not the machinations of Moscow and this or that congress of the Communist International—is the real story, one that needs to be told and understood if we are to reorganize a stronger Left out of the confusion and fragmentation that has made the Left so ineffectual in most of the developed world.

Dolinar begins by tracing the emergence of the broad front of black cultural figures through tough struggles against officially sanctioned terrorism in the South. He recounts with richly contextualized detail the mass action campaigns in defense of the nine Scottsboro Boys, who had been jailed and convicted on trumped-up rape charges in March 1931, and of Angelo Herndon, a young black communist labor organizer arrested in July 1932 under Georgia's slave-era laws against "insurrection." (The comparison with the repressive uses today of "homeland security" statutes will be lost on few readers.)

Dolinar then reconstructs how, over the ensuing years, those two struggles and others joined like tributaries joining to make a mighty river. The united front that formed in, and was steeled by, those struggles included not just the many black communists Dolinar lifts out of virtual oblivion—James E. Jackson, William L. Patterson, Louise Thompson, Rose McClendon, and John P. Davis—but also prominent mainstream figures such as Theodore Dreiser, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Groucho and Harpo Marx, Benny Carter, W. C. Handy, Cab Calloway, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Canada Lee, Josh White, Ralph Bunche, Lester Granger, and numerous others.

And on the labor front, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, cultivated from the grassroots by young African-American collegians, fought segregation, police brutality, lynch law, and economic peonage in

[Chicago] *Defender* column to protest the atom bomb, address independence movements in Asia and poke fun at un-American committees."

As to why the US government would have targeted Hughes, you need read only Dolinar's illuminating section on Hughes's work as a war correspondent on the antifascist side in the Spanish Civil War, writings that aren't generally included in Hughes's anthologized works. Few today will have had an opportunity to appreciate how Hughes and other black writers and artists attracted rank-and-file black Americans to large rallies at which they convinced the crowds that the fight of progressive Spaniards was their fight, too.

Himes Kept His Hope in the Labor Movement

Chester Himes took up writing during his seven-and-a-half-year stay in the Ohio State Penitentiary for armed robbery. After his parole in 1936, he could find only low-paying jobs in Cleveland despite having had short stories published in *Esquire,* the *Amsterdam News,* the *Atlanta Daily World,* and *Abbott's Monthly.* He got some writing jobs through the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project, however, and met leftist and communist writers at Cleveland's Karamu House, a neighborhood center that founded the nation's first black community theater program.

Despite his obvious gift for writing, Himes, like almost all other African-American journalists, photographers, secretaries, and pressmen in that era, couldn't get a job on the staff of any of the almost completely segregated newspapers or magazines. Relocating to Los Angeles to see if he could use some Hollywood connections provided chiefly by the Ohio writer Louis Bromfield, Himes later recalled in his autobiography *The Quality of Hurt,* "When they saw my face [on the Warner Bros. lot] I was finished—period."

Himes then established impressive leftist credentials through his efforts to unionize LA factory workers under the threat of anti-union police thugs. He also eloquently defended Chicanos and Japanese Americans who were victims of relentless bigotry and persecution. Drawing on his own experiences in his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), Himes seems to support general communist ideals and objectives. The narrative strongly condemns, however, communists and noncommunists alike who would preserve dual or Jim Crow unionism, justifying their cowardice by arguing that fighting to desegregate trade unions during wartime would hurt the country's military efforts.

American communists tended to praise *If He Hollers,* if begrudgingly, but Himes's next novel, *Lonely Crusade* (1947), drew enraged critiques from Communist Party USA circles. Himes's protagonist, Lee Gordon, a black communist, confronts duplicity, racism, and cynical efforts to exploit him and other African Americans from both the corporate establishment and his fellow, communist-led union organizers. Himes said of the book: "The left hated it, the right hated it, Jews hated it, Blacks hated it," but the plot did not "record a single event that I hadn't known to happen."

Dolinar writes that in his "powerful portrait of the Communist Party's failure to

adequately address the concerns of Black workers," Himes had, as the scholar Alan Wald argues, "predate[d] other books of Black estrangement from the Communist Party—Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) and Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967)." But unlike the three Wald cites, Dolinar notes, Himes never "lost all hope in the labor movement," nor did he receive material benefits for his critique of the communist Left or derive career boosts via a cozy relationship with the US's liberal anticommunist elite in the publishing industry and academia.

Indeed, while he maintained an existentialist's notion of an absurdity lying underneath human purposive actions of any sort, political or otherwise, Himes remained an emotionally militant anti-anticommunist. Dolinar quotes a 1970 interview of Himes by French writer Michel Fabre. "Himes," Fabre wrote, "suggested that African Americans follow the example of the North Vietnamese, 'If the Viet Cong weren't so well organized, there's no way a group of peasants could put up such an effective resistance.'"

Dolinar contends that Himes's comments "are reflective of a fetishization of violence during the Black Power era." No doubt many African-American activists at that time did fetishize, but this is, as Rap Brown pointed out, a land whose mainly Euro-American citizenry has always fetishized violence as intensely as it has apple pie. Himes's comments reflect his admiration not of violence but of the Vietnamese people's successful exercising of their right to defend themselves and expel invaders and occupiers, a victory achieved by a chiefly communist-directed national popular front. It's odd, and perhaps symptomatic of a big American blind spot, that even in a book prizing the history of a popular front, the author seems not to recognize one of the most impressive real-world examples of that sociopolitical tactic. Is it any wonder why, in the land of Occupy Wall Street, the embattled working class cannot wage even a general strike?

Dolinar, nevertheless, does show how Himes's literary themes remained militantly pro-black, and he is perceptive to note that although Himes said he had written his renowned series of detective novels for money to sustain him in exile, the dazzling yarn-spinner "was ignored by the [US] white publishing industry," an industry that has consistently rewarded black anticommunists then and now.

Harrington Left the States—But Not the Left

Ollie Harrington began his career as black America's most successful editorial cartoonist and ended it in exile in the German Democratic Republic ("East Germany") as one of the most popular and influential political cartoonists in the world. It would be almost impossible for an anticommunist to find anything comforting in Harrington's work, so the US orthodoxy has generally relegated him to the out-of-sight, out-of-mind bin along with most progressive history. Dolinar, however, compiles a fine portrait of a man who chose to leave his country rather than to subject himself to the McCarthyite inquisition or to blunt his pen to save his professional skin.

Dolinar describes how Harrington's early involvement in united-front battles against union busting, racist atrocities, and fascism turned a young artist trained in Yale University's School of Fine Arts into an incorruptible cultural warrior. Reared in Harlem by an African-American father and Hungarian immigrant mother, Harrington began earning money from his drawing skills from 1932 on. He joined the *Amsterdam News* in May 1935, falling in with an illustrious group of black journalists that included Ted Poston, Marvel Cooke, Roi Ottley, book reviewer Henry Lee Moon, Howard University scholar-dean Kelly Miller, historian J. A. Rogers, and cartoonist E. Simms Campbell. Backed by Heywood Broun, founder of the Newspaper Guild journalist's trade union in 1933, Harrington and his colleagues at the *Amsterdam News* and a few other black newspapers voted to join the Guild. When the *News*'s owners refused to recognize the union, the staff struck. After eleven weeks and thirty-six arrests, during which time Paul Robeson and Zora Neale Hurston joined the picket line, the paper was sold to new Afro-American owners, and the strike resulted, Dolinar notes, in "the first time Black workers had won a union contract with a Black employer."

During the strike, Harrington had befriended the black communist and New York City councilman Ben Davis Jr. and also created his most memorable character, a salt-of-the-earth Harlemite called Bootsie. "Bootsie," Dolinar writes, "endured the same trials and tribulations as many others in Harlem during the Depression, but always came up laughing. One night in a neighborhood bar, Langston Hughes said it was 'very simple,' Bootsie was 'laughin' to keep from cryin.' Bootsie was perhaps an inspiration for Hughes's later creation of Jesse B. Simple, a similar character that through humor explores the contradictions of Black life."

Harrington was also an outstanding reporter. He covered the training of the Tuskegee Airmen in Alabama and also the black GIs' campaign in Italy during the Allied victory in World War II. When he returned to the States, he became the NAACP's public relations director in 1946 and played an effective organizing role in several racist atrocities that scarcely a black American under seventy-five has any inkling of today.

The first atrocity was in February 1946, when Isaac Woodard, a black veteran, was returning to his home in South Carolina by bus via Georgia. His wife awaited him in Winnsboro, South Carolina. The Greyhound bus driver cursed Woodard when Woodard asked him if he could wait at a bus stop long enough for Woodard to use the bathroom. Woodard cursed the driver back. When the bus stopped in Batesburg, South Carolina, a half hour later, the police were waiting for Woodard. The driver said Woodard was drunk and disorderly. Woodard protested that he was not drunk, but the police beat him, jailed him, beat him some more, and tossed him into a cell—blinded by the assault.

The story slowly trickled out of the South, and the communist *Daily Worker* broke the news about the incident. Harrington played a key role in building a massive drive to support Woodard medically and legally, and the united front grew to include the Urban League, the AFL, CIO, ACLU, National Law-

yers Guild, National Negro Congress, and NAACP. On August 17, 1946, 25,000 people rallied in Lewisohn Stadium in New York for Woodard in what was called "Harlem's Greatest Show." Performers included Josh White, Canada Lee, W. C. Handy, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Nat "King" Cole, Pearl Bailey, Louis Jordan, Billie Holiday, Betty Garrett, Bill Robinson, Woody Guthrie, and others. Woodard received significant financial support but no justice in the courts.

The second atrocity Harrington reacted against occurred in Columbia, Tennessee, in February 1946. A white mob led by police attacked a black neighborhood that was protecting James Stephenson after Stephenson, a Navy veteran, fought a white man who had attacked him after James objected to insults hurled at his wife, Gladys. Driven back by black gunfire, the mob regrouped and gained the backing of US Army national guardsmen and state police, who then ransacked the neighborhood, bludgeoned dozens of residents, and arrested 101 persons, including the Stephensons.

Harrington wrote pamphlets in defense of the Stephensons, and a national defense committee formed, with participation by Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Albert Einstein, A. Philip Randolph, Langston Hughes, Joe Louis, and Mary McLeod Bethune, among many prominent figures. Harrington's news releases widely exposed American Jim Crow injustice, and possibly as a result of the resulting international attention to US racism and other factors, twenty-three of the twenty-five black defendants were declared not guilty. No whites had even faced trial.

The third incident was a small massacre in July 1946, when a white mob, some wearing their military uniforms, seized a young farmworker couple, Roger and Dorothy Malcolm, and Dorothy's brother, George Dorsey, and his wife, Mae. The mob tied the two couples to a tree and riddled them with bullets. Their "crime": Roger Malcolm had defended his wife against the sexual advances of their employer, Barnette Hester. After Roger was jailed, his wife had gotten the Dorseys to try to win his release.

Only two days after the killings, Harrington and leaders of the united-front organizations, headed by the communist-led Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Negro National Congress, the National Maritime Union, and the non- or anticommunist NAACP (which has often taken a militant position to avoid being shown up by radicals), organized a mass outdoor meeting of 5,000 people at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. Lena Horne said of the murders, "When such things are going on, I no longer feel there is a place of refuge for us in the United States unless these things can be stopped."

Instead of identifying and punishing the racist criminals in these and many similar incidents, the US government stepped up efforts to single out Harrington and others as examples of alleged communists who would have to be purged and even punished if the major establishment constituents of the front wished to maintain funding and avoid being weakened or destroyed under the various laws that purported to be aimed at combating subversion. The government's tactics, which foreshadowed the design and use of many of the laws purporting to fight terrorism today, convinced the NAACP top brass to force Harrington out of his job in 1947.

In his autobiography, *Why I Left,* Harrington explains the events surrounding his hasty move to East Berlin in 1951. According to Harrington, a close acquaintance who was an NAACP staffer and also an undercover FBI agent invited him to a Washington, DC, bar and warned him that the congressional red hunters planned to subpoena him that week and might seize his passport, as they had Paul Robeson's, if Harrington did not leave the country at once. Both Robeson's and Harrington's "crime"—and this should alert popular front builders of today to one of Uncle Sam's vulnerable spots—was to expose abroad the United States' abusive, negligent, undemocratic, and hypocritical treatment of a section of its citizens.

To preserve his independence, Harrington settled in Paris for a decade before moving to East Germany in 1961. He drew humorous and caustic cartoons and illustrations targeting US racism, hypocrisy, and warmongering for a variety of leftist US and international publications. (His Thomas Hart Benton–like painting of a black farmer graces Dolinar's book cover.) The collapse of the communist states effectively ended Harrington's career, however, though Dolinar notes that several black writers and cartoonists have now picked up the activist pen and are trying to follow his example of combining aesthetics and politics. We can only hope that they recognize the lesson to be drawn from this book.

Dolinar deserves recognition and gratitude for showing that it was government-supported intrigues that fragmented the US Left in general, and particularly the vanguard wing that comprised so many brilliant, fearless, but now unsung black activists. He shows, too, how jobs and publishing outlets all but disappeared for those who fought racism from both a nationalist and internationalist position.

But this book's chief contribution is its thorough delineation not only of how effective popular fronts have been, but also of the challenges inevitability experienced by members of the formation. Fronts have weak spots at the joints where stress from government repression overloads certain weaker components. The very word "front" illustrates the vulnerability, with its connotation of both a military front line *and* a falsity, as in a facade or mask concealing a controversial element from public view. The semantics convey the challenges facing all would-be organizers of a front: without a dedicated, radical element at its center, the progressive front is inert; those in power are quite aware of this, and thus they attack and seek to isolate the radical element if it strays too far left of the main body.

In the two major red scares conducted by the US, the first in the WWI period and the second after WWII, the bourgeoisie offered a hand to those who wished to rejoin the mainstream: "You've been duped by cunning radicals. Why don't your red associates step forward and reveal themselves as communists?" But when radicals did reveal their affiliation with any blacklisted political groups, their moderate associates knew that further association with them would likely cost them their jobs and social status. As for the "card-carrying" radicals themselves, once branded as subversives under repressive legislation, they risked an array of punishments, from deportation, job loss, and imprisonment to daily police surveillance,

disruption by informers and undercover agents, and social ostracism.

One can trace the tactics of reaction in the United States, especially the cloaking of repression behind the language of "national security" decades earlier than the first red scare. After passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, it was illegal to help slaves escape to freedom. Those who were caught violating the act could be charged with "constructive treason." On the Portside Internet site, the historian Donald Yacovone was quoted as observing that "being an abolitionist or a conductor on the Underground Railroad was about as popular and as dangerous as being a member of the Communist Party in 1955." Place that observation alongside Dolinar's book and you have a disturbing continuity in US politics wrapped in a nutshell.

Today's counterparts to abolition—the fight-back movements in the fragmented Western countries—spontaneously bubble up and fizzle out as activists try, so far with few signature victories, to unite immigration, civil rights, anti-imperialist, sex/gender, environmental, and Wall Street movements. That's one reason progressives are looking back with renewed appreciation at the period Dolinar has covered. In England, for example, the filmmaker Ken Loach has just released *Spirit of '45,* a documentary that explores the united Left that built the postwar welfare state and the tactics used by the bourgeoisie to dismantle it.

Loach's conclusion deserves the attention of American progressives who think the Democratic Party can become the engine of political change: "We're not going to reclaim the Labor Party. I mean in the last [Labor] leadership election the left didn't even have a candidate, this was after decades of people saying reclaim the Labor Party couldn't even get a candidate because it had been purged by Blair and his gang. The unions have got to cut the ties, start again, with everyone on the left, with all the campaigns, the NHS [National Health Service] campaign, the housing campaign, the community services campaigns—everybody. And let's begin again, and then we could really move."

British progressives are also reexamining the early twentieth-century united front with a new book and symposium titled *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922.* Now available for the first time in English, thanks to editor and translator John Riddell, the book contains the "rich conversations and debates that shaped a generation of revolutionaries" and provides "implications for activists in current conditions of global capitalism" (www.socialistproject.ca/leftstreamed/ls161.php).

The Left is inquiring into the sources of the strength of the black cultural front and other instances of broad, democratic, progressive, *and* effective movements that fought to correct and to one day overcome the manifold ills of present-day capitalism. By unearthing the sources of strength of the black cultural front and recalling its many tactical advances and even key victories, Dolinar has helped those who would forge and fortify the links between the major movements and organizations that must come together in our era if we are to turn back the tide of neoliberalism and reaction.