"A Road to Peace and Freedom"

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With its commitment to union and civil rights activism, the IWO offered more to its members than life insurance. But when they put down their picket signs, members could also, if they liked, spend almost all their leisure time at their local IWO lodge. A wide array of recreational activities was on tap to fill every hour of a worker’s day with class-conscious fun. The pages of IWO publications such as *The Spark* and *The New Order* from the early 1930s illustrate how comprehensive the organization’s social network could be, reporting on amateur dramatic societies, mandolin orchestras, and workers’ choirs as well as youth branch members attending summer outings such as boat rides, swimming parties, or trips to Communist summer camps like Camp Nitgedaiget and Camp Kinderland. Lodges hosted “interesting programs of song and poetry,” “chalk talks” on current events, and drama festivals where they collegially competed against other theater troupes. They held costume balls and picnics and competed in IWO sports leagues in basketball, baseball, football, even tennis. Classes were offered to sportsmen and sportswomen in gymnastics, tumbling, wrestling, and boxing. IWO lodges screened films and then discussed their class-conscious messages; they sponsored folk-dancing troupes, art classes, and essay and fiction contests for aspiring writers. The IWO’s magazines themselves were outlets for members looking to break into working-class journalism. Members showed up at lodges, then, not only to collect accident pay, visit a dental clinic, or buy life insurance. The hours of the week were filled with working-class fun.¹

As a working-class fraternal society, however, the IWO offered fun with a purpose, for the organization’s founders regarded recreation not as a
diversion to blunt the rougher edges of workers’ misery but as a tool with which to educate its members that another world was possible. The editors of *The New Order* declared, “Our chief aim is to give expression to the athletic, social, and cultural requirements of the young workers and working class student.” A Yiddish “Declaration of Principles of the International Workers Order” published in *The Spark* was blunter in its commitment to culture:

The I.W.O. recognizes one field in which it can develop a particularly fruitful action—viz.: the field of culture. The Order realizes that culture is a potent instrument in the hands of the bourgeoisie to enslave the toiling masses, and that when the bourgeoisie, through its schools, press, institutions of adult education, and the bourgeois “intelligentsia,” purports to “carry the light to the masses,” in fact it purveys them with such information, and influences their minds in such manner, that they might become faithful servants of the capitalistic order. The I.W.O. therefore, declares it as its duty to not only develop its members culturally, but to develop them in a proletarian way, i.e., to give them such culture as will clarify their minds, fortify their wills, strengthen their ranks, mobilize them for the fight against the capitalistic order, elevate them to the dignity of builders of a new society.

The Order thus envisioned its choirs, drama troupes, and baseball teams as a counterweight to the hegemonic power of mass entertainment, which it alleged was buttressing the harmful status quo. As the editors of *The New Order* promised, “Out of the chaos of a crazed, ballyhooed, boss driven American Culture, there has arisen a Proletarian Culture which is fast approaching the day when it can ‘thumb its nose at its Bourgeois predecessor.’”

It is not clear whether every lodge member who showed up for social events was as thoroughly committed to deploying play scripts as weapons against the existing social order as leaders may have hoped. In defending the IWO, many members stressed the pleasure they received from celebrating their ethnic cultures in Slavic, Hungarian, Jewish, Puerto Rican, and other ethnic theater and dance troupes. The very entertainments designed to drive out the “ballyhooed, boss driven American Culture” served as a pleasurable respite from often drab, exhausting, or even dangerous days in industrial job sites and neighborhoods. In IWO theater groups, revelry, not revolution, may have prevailed.

For their own different reasons, agents of the wartime OSS and IWO treasurer Peter Shipka highlighted the plethora of entertainment venues the organization offered that kept many members active. In 1944 an FNB officer of the OSS wrote to FNB director DeWitt Clinton Poole, “In fulfillment of
one of its announced aims the IWO pursues a diversified program of social-cultural activities,” listing song, dance, drama festivals, sports, and summer camps as some of the cultural practices “skillfully put to the service of IWO’s political program.” The IWO’s National Film Division, a concert bureau, and dancers and singers in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and African American troupes helped the IWO “spread its message and gained new adherents to its viewpoints,” the agent wrote. He also cited a *Daily Worker* article that asserted of the IWO’s cultural program, “When you give people a chance at self-expression, . . . you are doing a valuable thing for them, a thing they appreciate. Whether they participate as actors or as audience, sharing a cultural experience creates a bond and makes them willing to listen to what you have to say.”

Through its cultural activities the IWO offered an emotional pedagogy, dramas and musical groups that endeavored to create an affective community that instilled in actors and audience a cathartic redemption for their otherwise often marginalized workers’ lives. These feelings of power flipped the larger society’s status hierarchies, so that “unskilled workers,” racially and ethnically stigmatized communities, could reclaim a valorized sense of something large and noble. A cheerful mood prevailed as IWO members contemplated revolution. Both the OSS and the *Daily Worker* shared the assumption that, whether on stage or in the audience, attendees at IWO cultural events were absorbing the desired proletarian message.

For his part, Shipka, in helping IWO officers prepare their appeal of New York’s liquidation order, characterized entertainment activities as designed to foster pride in ethnic heritage. He told the Order’s defense team, “The Order attempts to encourage the preservation of the cultural heritages and artistic values developed over the years and through the generations by the peoples of the different countries of the world and brought with them to the United States.” Among the IWO’s activities encouraging such “cultural heritage and artistic values,” Shipka listed sports competitions such as “national baseball, soft-ball, boxing, bowling, soccer, ping-pong, swimming and other tournaments, . . . track and field events, and outdoor and indoor games and the like.” The Order also “encouraged the development of groups in dramas, choruses, social and interpretive dancing, orchestras, bands and photography.”

Many amateur actors and dancers also likely participated in the Order’s more overtly political campaigns. Still, in its entertainments the IWO went beyond denunciations of capitalist misery or explicit demands for Social Security or an end to Jim Crow and allowed many working-class members to perform and celebrate their often denigrated ethnic cultures before valorizing and appreciative audiences of their peers. In this regard the IWO carried forth a venerable tradition of left-wing immigrant *Vereinswesen*
(associational life) where members could make sense of their lives on their own terms, and maybe have fun doing it, too.

“Something to Think About” and “Good Peppy Music”

In carving out a left-wing working-class recreational space, the IWO carried on the work of the CP, which likewise sought a space in which recreation would develop a transformative class consciousness. As Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and even Marx himself noted, cultural institutions are often contested spaces. So, too, as the IWO’s Yiddish “Declaration” perceived, cultural institutions are often employed to buttress the socioeconomic elite and a society’s status quo. Schools, literature, popular songs, and other cultural productions often inculcate lessons that society is just and those who are in political and economic command are there because they earned it or that the social order is “natural.” However, this hegemony, Gramsci recognized, was imperfect and in constant need of shoring up—or tearing down if one believed wealth has been unfairly appropriated or maldistributed. In moments of crisis the same cultural productions—plays, schools, and musical groups—are deployed by adherents of social movements to harness discontent to imagine that another world is possible.

As sociologists of social movements recognize, so too, activists quickly realized they had to “weave together a moral, cognitive and emotional package of attitudes” if they were to win converts. “Cognitive liberation,” James Jasper argues, “is probably more important for its bundle of emotions than for any ‘objective’ information about odds of success. ‘Liberation’ implies heady emotions.” Ann Swidler, too, argues that social movements are often most effective when they transpose group allegiances and cultural symbols into new causes. The members of the IWO took these messages of the transformative possibilities of leisure to heart, continuing a tradition of left-wing immigrant culture that combined class militancy with recreational activities. While in the 1920s and during the Depression CP activists offered lengthy and intricate expositions on Marxism at their rallies, heavy on the cognitive side, they did not slight the emancipatory appeal to emotions and fun. Education and entertainment mixed as left-wing rallies employed singing societies and theater troupes to preach a new gospel of Marxism via cultural institutions with which Jewish, Italian, and Slavic workers were familiar.

During the early twentieth century, radical immigrants made plenty of room for dancing while advancing the revolution. As Michael Denning notes, after the New Deal took hold in the 1930s, a “laboring” of popular culture developed in which working-class agendas and themes flourished in theater, art, literature, and music. What is less frequently noticed, though, is that radical immigrants began this “laboring” of popular culture in obscure
radical sites long before their proletarian themes were given the imprimatur of more celebrated tastemakers. Moreover, entertainments of the CP and its affiliates were often interracial affairs, as organizers recognized the multiracial nature of the American proletariat that the Party sought to recruit. From the CP’s inception, Slavic, Italian, and Jewish workers made common cause with black and Hispanic fellow workers, even if they frequently struggled to overcome their “white chauvinism.” This at a time when crossing or questioning the color line was regarded by many white Americans as the most subversive activity of all. Members of interracial CP affiliates worked to advance industrial unionism, support for the Soviet Union, black civil rights, even revolution, but they also envisioned pleasure itself as a means of dismantling the grim capitalist status quo. The CP refashioned various ethnic traditions as props of the Left’s “sequestered social sites” and paid attention to the need to engage the emotions and hearts of rally attendees, not just their intellects. As earlier agrarian radicals had built a “movement culture” enabling them to envision the possibility of ending their suffering, radical immigrants employed dance troupes, theater societies, and singing groups to serve as their own proletarian schoolrooms. This leftist sociocultural infrastructure was didactic, but proletarian pastimes also built solidarity and morale among those who envisioned a coming workers’ state.

Early on left-leaning organizers recognized the necessity of promising entertainment at rallies, but the proletarian cause was at the forefront; this was fun with a class-conscious purpose. As a flyer for a 1922 May Day celebration sponsored by the United Toilers of America put it, “Our Workers’ Holiday is not a day of rest and play; it is a day of struggle. The class-conscious worker greets this day with gladness and hope of victory, while the oppressors and exploiters of the workers await this day, grinding their teeth with rage and mortal fear.” The Toilers’ lengthy text went through a list of proletarian grievances before vowing, “We will refuse to allow ourselves to be killed by overwork.” They then offered the carrot to go along with the Hammer and Sickle stick: a not-to-be-missed May Day celebration with entertainers in English, Lithuanian, Russian, and Polish at Detroit’s International Workers’ Home.

While such left-wing rallies stressed the need to educate workers on their true proletarian mission, comrades nevertheless also recognized the need to leaven the education with a bit of fun. Members of the Communist-affiliated National Textile Workers Union were told that “educational activity must not be of a dry-as-dust manner,” and use of movies, theatricals, dances, and sports was urged to enhance the effectiveness of recruiting meetings. Communists seeking to organize Chicago steelworkers offered a play, Steel Strike, by the Workers’ Cultural Federation, but promised “good peppy music” and “dancing! dancing!” as well. Similarly, Communist mine workers promised a “Full Day of Fun” for a rally at Nanticoke’s Sans Souci Park to “make Sep-
tember 1st the Workers’ Day”—“amusements, sports, entertainment, carnival, dancing”—and a speech by Communist vice-presidential candidate Ben Gitlow. It cannot all be entertainment.12

During the 1926 coal miners’ strike, party factions in western Pennsylvania’s UMW promised “fun and education at Labor Chautauquas” that “left the folks with something to think about and a lot to laugh at in pleasant recollection.” The program “sandwiched speeches and lectures on the labor movement between gay layers of music and song.” On the bill were musical comedy sketches from a sister act, songs, jazz combos, and “Thumine’s Boys’ Band, from Sykesville—the same that jazzed up the miners’ march and mass meeting at Du Bois.” A schoolteacher from Sagamore composed songs and organized women’s auxiliaries to help picketers. The U.M.W. Bulletin promised “no better fun anywhere,” even though the Chautauqua proved only a brief bright spot in yet another violently squashed strike. Comrades knew what sociologists of social movements later realized, that emotions, which Jasper argued “have disappeared from models of protest,” had to be engaged no less than the intellects of those one sought to recruit.13

As scholars have reminded us, the carefree Roaring Twenties were also, for many workers, the era of wage cuts, speedups, lockouts, and the violent suppression of strikes.14 But all was not grim for the class-conscious worker. Throughout the late 1920s and into the early 1930s, festive entertainments such as the coal-camp Chautauquas offered a respite from the workaday world. Carnivalesque settings, as for Bakhtin, were often possible moments of liberation from, and subversion of, the established order. The CP hoped these festivities would not be brief reprieves from the dominant order but the catalyst for a transformative social movement. Left-wing workers thus frequently offered celebrations in relief of threatened strikers or to remind workers of some revolutionary anniversary that might eventually save them from bosses’ Gatling guns. A 1926 “Gala Concert at Coney Island Stadium” promised an “Orchestra of One Hundred, Chorus of Two Hundred Voices, 50 Ballet Dancers,” to raise funds for the starving children of striking Passeic textile workers. In an appeal that began, “The Bosses Hell No!,” the International Workers’ Aid arranged to send striking textile workers’ children to the International Workers’ Camp in Morristown, New Jersey. James Scott has argued that the marginalized poor can often only gain advances through sly, under-the-radar acts of resistance, some of the only “weapons” available to the weak. By reclaiming prominent sites of mass entertainment and amusement such as Coney Island for airing workers’ causes, leftists engaged in a defiantly public transcript.15

Lenin Memorial meetings in Philadelphia and Detroit featured “ Interracial Choruses of 300 Voices” presenting “revolutionary music.” Posters for the gala at Detroit’s Danceland Auditorium reminded concertgoers that “Lenin, like Karl Marx, . . . taught the workers of this country that the work-
ers in the white skin cannot be emancipated so long as the worker in the dark skin is enslaved.” An election rally at Danceland also featured not just Bedacht lecturing on the “issue in the election—class against class!” but an “excellent revolutionary music program.”

In times of economic crisis, these counterhegemonic spaces qualified as sites of potential liberation. After years of breadlines and soup kitchens, rallies with three hundred interracial singers or dance parties probably seemed liberating—or threatening, depending on one’s perspective. Considering, too, the fear that interracial dancing or singing evoked in the forces of law, order, and the segregated status quo, the very transgressive act of “mixed” dancing may have been part of the fun of a night at Danceland. The very act of such public defiance achieved one of the workers’ goals.

The forces of law and order saw such interracial celebrations as threatening, subversive occasions. In Clifton, New Jersey, IWO members participated along with three hundred other black and white radicals in a mixed-race dance sponsored by the Ramblers Sports Club of the Labor Sports Union of America. When news of the affair reached the city’s police chief, he arrested the hall’s owner and fined him $27 for allowing a mixed-race dance. “We won’t stand for mixed dances in Clifton,” Chief Holster declared. The Ramblers’ black president was also arrested and beaten up in nearby Passaic for walking with a white woman as he collected funds for the *Daily Worker*. A protest meeting was slated for the same hall where the offending interracial dance occurred, but when the masses arrived the doors were padlocked. Undeterred, “300 Negroes and whites held their meeting in the street, and marched singing to the headquarters of the International Labor Defense and the Unemployed Council. Members of the National Textile Workers Union, the Workers International Relief, the International Workers Order, the Young Communist League and the Communist Party were among the marchers.”

As Victoria Wolcott has shown, entertainment venues such as amusement parks, bowling alleys, and dance halls were some of the most fiercely defended icons of racial segregation. Fears of race-mixing on the dance floor evoked phobias of sexual contact and social equality. That the dancers in Clifton were celebrating on an interracial dance floor, among fellow believers in leftist causes, was doubly offensive to upholders of the status quo.

Other galas celebrating the ninth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, seventh anniversary of the founding of the Workers (Communist) Party, or the birthday of the *Daily Worker* featured “elaborate musical programs” or dancing, along with speeches by prominent comrades such as William Z. Foster, who would become general secretary of the CPUSA in 1945. While the workers learned their proletarian canon, they made time to polka, for as the organizers of one workers’ picnic promised, a “good time [was] assured.” Lithuanian, Russian, and Ukrainian Workers’ Clubs in Philadelphia pooled
their mandolin-playing and singing talents for “an Evening of Joy and Inspiration.” The International Orchestra, the *Freiheit Gesangs Verein* (Freedom Singing Society), the Pioneer Chorus, the Saint Paul Workers Orchestra, and the Young Workers’ Mandolin Orchestra all did their best to keep this revolutionary promise.20

As Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta note, there is nothing intrinsically radical in folk music. Some of the earliest proponents of folk music espoused conservative politics and saw the revival of “pure” culture as an antidote to the menace of industrial America. Even Henry Ford, enemy of unions and proponent of mass-produced assimilation, sponsored old-time fiddle contests at Greenfield Village. Other Italian folk dancers or Polish singers were bulwarks of conservative white ethnic parishes. It was the progressive organizational framework of Pioneer choruses and May Day celebrations that infused leftist connotations into the folk music at these “evenings of joy and inspiration.”21

Immigrants heard something other than laissez-faire choruses at venues such as the Labor Lyceum. Francesca Polletta and James Jasper write of the vitality of “institutions removed from the physical and ideological control of those in power” for building social movements contesting the status quo. In a similar fashion, African Americans in Detroit deployed the swing clubs of Paradise Valley as a safe space in which to hear critiques of hyper-segregated America as well as enjoy themselves. So, too, members of left-leaning drama clubs and singing groups were more than entertainers, for through their artistic endeavors they sought to teach a pleasing lesson of the justness of revolutionary struggles. In January 1925 the Lithuanian Working Women’s Alliance of America reported, “One of its main activities is to organize the Lithuanian Workers’ children into groups, teach them singing and dramatics (of a working class character). . . and to give them a class conscious understanding of their position in society.” Groups that later affiliated with the IWO such as the SWS established dramatic unions and schools to teach workers’ theater, while in Harlem proletarian playwrights such as Paul Peters lectured at the Harlem Workers School on “the Negro and the Working-Class Theater.” Members of Workers’ Dramatic Unions saw their proletarian theaters as antidotes to the escapist fare of commercial theater. Jewish comrades held “a trial on the ‘Burlesque Theater,’” which was presumably found guilty. Songs of class consciousness were effective recruiting tools. At a June 1931 meeting of the South Slav Singing Society, members “took up the question of affiliating with the Friends of the Soviet Union.”22

Still, those more interested in aesthetics sometimes drowned out radical vocalists. “Among the Ukrainians the situation is very deplorable,” Lovestone complained regarding work in Connecticut. “Instead of being the leader in the Ukrainian colony,” the party faction was “gradually becoming
an adjunct of the Ukrainian singing societies.” Lovestone ruefully concluded, “our own very small group is gradually being absorbed by the backward mass and drawn into the swamps.” Such a lament shows there was no guarantee that the instructive message of comrade-entertainers reached the audience. The problem of reader-response—how do we know that every recipient imbibles the author’s “lesson” in just the way that she planned—affected singing Ukrainians and other comrades, too. As Lawrence Levine has argued, during the early twentieth century working-class people were not passive recipients of the entertainments offered by Hollywood or America’s radio networks. They chose the movies or radio programs they patronized and reinterpreted pat, happy endings to make them more plausible and applicable to their own lives. Something similar occurred in workers’ entertainment venues. The cultural experiences, assumptions, and life narratives of particular immigrants and communities affected whether these singers would find Lovestone’s intended lessons appealing. Maybe Connecticut Ukrainians just liked to sing.

That Ukrainians showed up at a Communist singing society or a coal miners’ Chautauqua suggested at least some sympathy to the message underlying songs and skits. Then again, there was no guarantee that attendees heard what the comrades wanted them to hear. In tiny outposts such as Pennsylvania coal patches, the militant Chautauqua might have been attended as one of the few sites of fun, or for instrumental nonmilitant reasons—they were fund-raising in support of strikers. Likewise, the singers who bedeviled Lovestone had their own complex reasons for singing their songs. Fellowship may have been enjoyed without inculcating the complete Bolshevist message of songs.

Sometimes the frequency of entertainments became a problem. Among larger Party units such as the Jewish Bureau, there were so many social affairs that the Freiheit Mandolin Orchestra was told to reschedule its concerts so it would not conflict with other entertainments; the orchestra countered that Communists gave its organization insufficient publicity. In 1946 Detroit, an organizer for the IWO, approached once too often to buy tickets for the “dance,” snapped that he was not a ticket agency. When this organizer discovered the new dance was a fund-raiser for the Daily Worker, he sheepishly asked the solicitor to mail him a letter that he could send out to various IWO lodges. Anthony Bimba likewise complained that the incessant demands on the recreational time of new converts to the Party was leading to high drop-out rates. The new member, Bimba argued, “hates to come to the meetings because he sees nothing else at these meetings but leaflets, tickets, peddling of all kinds.” He warned, “Unless this avalanche of all sorts of letters, instructions, tickets and ‘mobilizations’ is stopped, all our talk of retaining members in the party will be in vain. Don’t you see that? Can’t you see that?” There was only so much fun the proletariat could be expected to endure.
Competing recreational events sometimes caused friction. In 1930, Candela of the Party’s Italian Bureau, later head of the IWO’s Garibaldi Society, complained that an Italian fund-raising picnic was ordered canceled because it conflicted with another event deemed more important by the New York district. Candela was already incensed because the Party’s summer camp, Camp Nitgedaiget, still had not paid Il Lavoratore for the ads it had run. Candela protested that there was no way he could keep the paper running if the Party did not allow him to raise money or collect on past-due bills. “Are we going to take action ourselves and make a scandal?” he asked.26

Camp Nitgedaiget in upstate New York (Yiddish for “carefree”) was another counterhegemonic space, where class-conscious children and adults escaped tenements and enjoyed recreation far away from bosses’ prying eyes. Already in 1928 the camp promised prospective vacationers swimming, baseball, and theatricals. Another red camp, Camp Wocolona near Monroe, New York, advertised its offerings in New Masses: “Baseball and Revolution.” In between innings, campers were urged to “join the New Masses artists, writers, and their friends and enemies, in a discussion of ‘The Intellectual and the Labor Movement.’” Artists and writers such as Mike Gold, Lewis Mumford, and Hugo Gellert participated in the debate. The following year Nitgedaiget billed itself as “the Workers’ Rest Home,” promising “physical and mental recreation” in a “Proletarian Atmosphere.” IWO revelers later patronized “red” camps such as Nitgedaiget, Kinderland, and Lakeland.27

For all the baseball and polemics, the camps often had trouble paying their bills. In 1932 the Hungarian IWO complained that Nitgedaiget had failed to pay for ads in Új Előre. Perhaps as a result of such practices, at another red camp, the JPFO’s Camp Kinderland, director Saltzman and members of the camp’s board of trustees were expelled from the Party for several months due to the $10,000 deficit and unpaid bills they had allowed to accumulate.28

Despite financial woes, red camps were some of the few places workers could rehearse narratives countering the dominant society’s message that free-market capitalism was the all-American way. While children of laborers escaped with their parents from crowded dwelling spaces for a few weeks in the woods, they learned to conceptualize a different way of ordering industrial society. Outside of the camps, in the pre–New Deal era, Vice President Calvin Coolidge reminded readers of Good Housekeeping magazine that “non-Nordic” immigrants were imperiling the nation and that immigration restrictions were necessary to “safeguard not just the present but the future” of the nation. Other authority figures acted more directly and brutally on the non-Nordics of the land, as when policemen, private detectives, and state police squads—aptly dubbed “Cossacks” by Slavic miners—broke up strikes from the textile mills of Passaic to the coal fields of Pennsylvania through generous doses of tear gas and machine-gun bullets.29
Workers’ children flocked to camps to learn alternative ways of conceiving of their place in America. A teenager wrote that she had never thought much about racial brotherhood before her parents sent her to Camp Wo-Chi-Ca, a Port Murray, New Jersey, camp owned by the leftist Furriers’ Union. At Wo-Chi-Ca (shorthand for “Workers’ Children’s Camp”) this teenager first heard of the IWO and “learned, for the first time, how all people, regardless of race, color, or creed live together as one large happy family. . . . I learned that Negro and white are equal, and that is something I never knew or had thought about.” This camper returned home vowing to enroll in the IWO to do her bit for “cleaning up slums, doing away with racial discrimination.”

Competing narratives of workers’ spaces were on display in a Detroit Free Press article reporting on a 1930 raid on a red camp. “We have had this place under observation for weeks,” Prosecutor Norman Orr said. “It is the breeding ground for communism in the state. Impressionable young children are taken from the poorer home in Detroit, taught fiery communistic songs, told stories of ‘brutality of the bosses,’ and assured that the way to end these conditions is through opposition to all law and order.” But while Scott has argued that subalterns can often only be effective in pursuing counter-narratives to the ruling class through surreptitious “hidden transcripts,” Detroit workers openly advertised their camp with “huge signs bearing the legend ‘Workers’ Camp’” at several entrances. The salience for subalterns of “sequestered social sites,” as Scott puts it, meant Detroit comrades and others valued their camps and workers’ halls. But perhaps the defiant publicization of their alternative spaces, on view to all of society’s authority figures, was in and of itself part of the camp’s fun.

In Detroit the raided children wore their class-conscious allegiances openly. “To the children, the raid was an exciting experience,” the article continued. “Apparently under the direction of adults, they shouted communistic songs at the raiders as they searched the barracks, offices and dining rooms on the farm.” Among the subversive articles seized was a “crude childish drawing” that “portrayed a man labeled ‘Boss,’ swinging a cat-o-nine-tails over the bare back of a worker. ‘Don’t be a Slave’ was the caption lettered over it.”

A Different “Source of Americanization”

The flowering of class-conscious recreation came with the founding of the IWO. From its onset the IWO privileged the fostering of the ethnic and racial cultures of its members. The 1938 constitution recommitted the Order to interracialism: “The cultural heritage of every one of the many national and racial groups which make the American people has contributed to and enriched the life and traditions of our country. Our Order endeavors . . . to
make the same culture and traditions a source of Americanization of education, recreation and happiness for its members. The Order thus hopes to become a stronghold of unity and progress of mankind.”

From its inception the Order offered a broad range of integrated recreational activities. The youth magazine *The Spark* documented the baseball team organized by the Providence Youth Branch, which “is aiding the Scottsboro defense with all its might,” while the Chicago Youth Committee organized three youth branches, including a “Negro” one on the West Side. In some locations “white chauvinism” had to be overcome, but as early as July 1931 the John Reed Youth Club of Jersey City “repudiated the stand that they took on the Negro question,” and interracial organizing ensued. Providence members also produced the play *It’s Funny as Hell*. Philadelphians meanwhile formed an IWO Band and Workers International Relief Mandolin Orchestra, celebrating these achievements by singing the “Internationale.” New Yorkers supported an IWO symphony orchestra as well as a Dramatic Festival (won in 1934 by lodges of the Russian Society for their entry, *Broadway 1934*, even though it was noted that audience members disagreed with the judges and preferred *The Earth Moves*, enacted by Lodge 404). Jewish lodges in the Bronx sponsored theater groups and “talks on the motion picture.” An article on “Sports in the IWO” critiqued professional sports as just another way to enrich millionaire owners, whereas the aim of IWO baseball, basketball, and gymnastics teams was “to build up a healthy body and a healthy mind, a strong conscious fighter for the working class.”

In 1934 *The New Order* noted the development of baseball leagues in Los Angeles, where black, Hispanic, and white teams competed against each other. The IWO fielded integrated teams in Canton, Ohio, even though many lodges were ethnically defined as Slovak, Hungarian, or Jewish. There, IWO teams competed in the Stark County baseball league, breaking the color line thirteen years before Jackie Robinson. In Los Angeles the IWO also competed in tennis tournaments, at track and field meets, and in boxing, wrestling, and gymnastics. A similar array of teams for men and women was on offer in Chicago, Buffalo, Brooklyn, and other cities. *The New Order* congratulated the Berkeley, California, lodge, when, because no gyms were provided by the city, a member constructed basketball nets and gymnastics equipment on his own. These “sports shorts” in the paper were accompanied by an illustration of a worker-athlete punching a fat, top-hatted millionaire in the gut.

A similarly anticapitalist counter–Boston Marathon was held in 1935 to “demonstrate against new war plans,” while prior to that, in 1932, a workers’ counter-Olympics was slated for Chicago. The lily-white South African athletics squad, as well as the exclusion of colonial nations such as India at the real Olympics, came under particular condemnation. For leftists, sports were a political act.
At a 1951 New York state trial, Powers offered as evidence of the IWO’s Communist hazard its 1934 campaign to integrate baseball as well as its work defending the Scottsboro teens, “the Anti-Poll Tax Amendment, anti-lynch legislation, and the Civil Rights Program.” At a time when Southern segregationists were running the HUAC, integrationist fraternization, to say nothing of activism, was suspect.37

Even in small ways, the IWO championed the breaking of racial barriers. Integrated IWO baseball teams played games and passed petitions through the stands demanding baseball abolish the color line. Other IWO members wrote homages in their magazine, \textit{The New Order}, to “Comrade Basketball,” while IWO members joined an Interfaith and Interracial Coordinating Council planning an End Jim Crow in Baseball Day with demonstrations slated for the Polo Grounds and Ebbets Field. As noted, the protest rallies, which were to have included members of the IWO’s Jewish Division, were called off when the mayor agreed to meet with representatives of the council to seek a means of integrating baseball.38

In 1941, perhaps due to the influence of the many Slovak IWO members, \textit{Národné noviny} ran a comic strip by Joe Dujka, “The Numbskull Nine,” about an integrated baseball team whose star was the dark-skinned Latino Carlos Kelly. In one strip a fan taunts Carlos, “Throw the Foreigner Out! G’wan back to Brazil Nut! Go peddle your bananas!! You Havana Honky!” At which point the star’s girlfriend wallops him. When the fan asks “Why, lady?” she replies, “I pinch hit for my Carlos.” A few weeks later she joins the team as a player. And as noted, IWO secretary Milgrom greeted the integrated Cleveland Indians’ world championship “as a ‘victory for American democracy.’”39

The IWO’s Puerto Rican Cervantes Fraternal Society played an important role in fostering Latino culture where members “maintain[ed] our fraternal affiliations with one another and with our national hereditary culture.” Peter Moreno of Brooklyn deposed in an affidavit, “We have programs of native music and dancing in national costumes,” and he noted that Cervantes supported “a young folk’s baseball league called ‘Luis Olmo League.’ . . . They are very proud to be the only Puerto Rican baseball league in this country.” The Cervantes Fraternal Society also sponsored a concert by flamenco dancer Trini Romero at Carnegie Chamber Music Hall, to which all IWO members were invited.40

Teams competed for Eastern and Western District championships in basketball and baseball and held national meets timed to coincide with IWO conventions. In 1939 Hazleton, Pennsylvania, won the Eastern District basketball championship and played a Chicago team in the national finals. IWO president William Weiner was honored to throw the ball for the first tipoff. The African American \textit{Chicago Defender} publicized these tournaments, too—in one case an interracial New York team, the Lincoln Brigadiers, proudly touted its members’ service to Republican Spain. Local ethnic lodges
such as the SWS of Detroit also slated sports teams, fielding a bowling team
in 1947, even as it fretted over being able to fund such a team (the national
SWS board started a fund to assist the Detroiters). Other IWO members
fondly recalled bowling teams in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. 41

Such revelry did not cause comrades to lose sight of serious issues. Gen-
eral Secretary Bedacht urged his organization to “redouble . . . efforts for the
defense of the Negroes in America against lynching.” “Song, drama, living
newspapers, interracial children’s pageants and numerous other forms of cul-
tural activities,” he reminded the Order, “while they can educate and unify
all groups, are at the same time very satisfying and attractive mass entertain-
ment.” The Chicago Defender ran an article in 1936 in which Thompson urged
the “race” to tune in to IWO radio broadcasts of plays, songs, and musical
numbers dramatizing “the furtherance of social security.” The following year
the IWO presented “a jubilee concert and pageant in New York. . . . [I]ts pro-
logue presented three characters for three different periods in American his-
tory: 1776—Jefferson, 1861—Lincoln, 1937—A Communist leader.” During
the Popular Front, the CP cast communism as Americanism updated to the
twentieth century, and the Order presented tableaus that night of “Economic
exploitation of the 18th century,” “Capitalists united against the working
class,” “1886—the trial of the labor leaders,” “Crisis of 1929,” and 1937’s deus
ex machina, “The Communist Party calls for a united front.” 42

Theater groups were some of the mainstays of the IWO, designed to edu-
cate and entertain peers on industrial unions, militarism, and black civil
rights as well as to summon a usable past for the comrades. Philadelphia
lodges as early as 1934 sponsored dramatic societies that performed plays
such as The Bulls See Red and Recruit. These plays, the first of which presum-
ably pitted the police (“bulls”) against the comrades, as so often occurred
during the early years of the Depression, was supplemented in the Philadel-
phia lodge by “classes in Marxism.” In Chicago a citywide “speakers and
drama bureau” offered training to lodges looking to start theater groups.
While an IWO National Youth Day in Passaic featured militant theater pro-
ductions, smaller cities such as Elizabeth, New Jersey, sometimes had to
make do with performances by “a Chorus of Youth” that “sang some revolu-
tionary songs” in lieu of a theater group. 43

New York also supported an IWO symphony orchestra. In 1936 organizer
Bob Jacoby greeted the convention of New York City IWO branches “and
appealed to the membership . . . for support for the orchestra.” In this respect
the IWO was carrying forth the earlier work of the Workers Cultural Federa-
tion of the New York District, which in 1931 was urged by Paul Keller, direc-
tor of the Federation of Workers Choruses, to “get a stronger political content
into our music” and “to develop the emotional side of our propaganda.” The
affective work of the IWO was not neglected. The Federation of Workers Chor-
ruses was having some success in this regard among various white ethnic
singing groups and noted the development of the symphony orchestra later led by the IWO’s Jacoby. But Keller was less satisfied with the minimal development of brass bands and mandolin orchestras, which he believed could provide the music at mass demonstrations and strikes “to lead the workers to victory.” Keller was confident such brass bands could be developed in Brooklyn and the Bronx: “We have enough latent material.” Evidently the IWO agreed, for throughout the 1940s it continued to organize concert tours of Slovak and Ukrainian choirs and mandolin orchestras, although as anti-Communist fervor heated up in smaller towns such as Charleroi and Bentleyville, Pennsylvania, “getting halls (and holding them once gotten) is becoming a nightmare.” Still, with the IWO the show went on.44

The IWO even touched on higher culture if it thought it could make a revolutionary point. *The New Order* reported on the destruction of Diego Rivera’s mural at Rockefeller Center because of the offending inclusion of a portrait of Lenin. John D. Rockefeller was “so conscious of the inharmony in the situation that he had the mural destroyed—a pure case of vandalism. But Mr. Rockefeller would not get clubbed on the head or dragged into prison for such an offense.” *The New Order* happily reported, though, that Rivera “has photographs of his work and intends to restore his masterpiece.” They congratulated the muralist, too, for declaring, “My object was attained when the painting was destroyed. I thank the Rockefellers for its destruction because the act will advance the cause of the labor revolution. The assassination of my work will bring about a wider dissemination of the teachings of Lenin among the workers, so that it is a victory for the proletariat.”45

**“Our Plays for the People”: Revolutionary Theater**

IWO drama groups were another popular means of dissemination of the revolutionary message. Throughout the country theater troupes were active in performing militant works. Boston Latvians in the IWO celebrated a “Lenin Memorial Celebration Program” by performing a play, *January 9th*, about the failed 1905 Russian revolution. Chicago Croatian Socialists in the Dramatski Zbor “Nada” were not above satirizing their own stigmatization as dangerous bomb-throwers, as when they presented *Risen from the Ranks, or From Office Boy to President*. This parody of a Horatio Alger story features Oswald Sapp, a rural rube who applies for a job with the Amalgamated Pretzel Co. Industrial harmony, however, is disrupted by a baroquely bewhiskered anarchist dressed in red, who proclaims, “I am Kachooski, the young Bolshevik agitator from Moscow!” (Bwah hah hah!) Kachooski shows up with his infant son, who is similarly bearded. “Yes, even in Russia the babies have whiskers. In fact, they are born with them.” Kachooski organizes the Amalgamated Pretzel Benders’ Union and ruins Mister Millionbucks. Oswald, though, invents a pretzel-bending machine so the workers can be fired.
The union is broken, and Oswald marries Mister Millionbucks’ daughter at the play’s “happy” end.46

Prior to the Popular Front, the Croatians performed other plays mocking the palliatives of FDR’s New Deal, as in The Forgotten Man, where, to the tune of Roosevelt’s chipper campaign song “Happy Days Are Here Again,” the “Paytriot” sang: “What we need’s another war, / For life’s become an awful bore, / Oh what the hell’s the army for, / What we need’s another war!” The pop songs of Tin Pan Alley likewise were refashioned, as when “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” was reworked into a sardonic refrain of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation’s bailout of Wall Street but decidedly not the Forgotten Man. Popular culture proved a malleable tool when wielded by Socialist theater troupes.47

The theater had a political purpose not just in educating the audience but to give emotional and material comfort to those on strike in desperate times. A YCL actor from Newark wrote to Party activist Pat Toohey offering the services of his Newark Collective Theater comrades. He proposed “a full evening of theater to help the strikers” in Camden, offering the courtroom scene from They Shall Not Die! and Waiting for Lefty, “two very effective and entertaining pieces.” The fund-raiser, he wrote, would “undoubtedly prove successful in more ways than one.”48

Plays championing black civil rights were performed, too. The Rebel Arts Bulletin, whose motto was “Art to Serve Labor,” provided Chicago Croatians with a series of “Plays on Negro Life,” including Angelo Herndon by Langston Hughes, Trouble with the Angels by Bernard Schoenfeld (from the article by Hughes), Angelo Herndon Back in Atlanta by Elizabeth England, and Bivouac by Paul Peters, in which “a Negro Threatened with Lynching Is Saved Through the Militant Action of Friends and Sympathizers.” In Chicago radical Czechs took up the theme of black liberation, performing When Slavery Was in Bloom in America, a play lionizing abolitionists John Brown and Frederick Douglass. As Rebecca Hill notes, it was only on the Left that Brown was valorized as a masculinist, militant defender of racial equality, cast as a liberator and not, as many Americans were taught, an unstable, violent disturber of the peace.49

One of the most interesting IWO theaters was Solidarity Lodge’s Harlem Suitcase Theater, in which Thompson brought the plays of her friend, African American poet Hughes, before working-class audiences. The IWO had already published some of Hughes’s “revolutionary verse” in dime booklet form as well as sponsoring a lecture tour for him, “A Negro Poet Looks at a Troubled World.” In 1938 Solidarity Lodge founded the Harlem Suitcase Theater, so named, Thompson said, because “we wanted a theater with few props, . . . that we could carry it around in a suitcase and do our plays for the people.” The first play performed was written especially for the Suitcase Theater by Hughes, a send-up of black oppression, Don’t You Want to Be Free?
that dramatized a lynching and black and white workers’ realization they had to work together to throw off class-based subordination. Thompson recalled this play “was about as far as we went with agit-prop,” and the play portrayed Jim Crow insurance agents (familiar to Harlem members who had entered the IWO to escape them) and wary characters who denounced agitators as radicals. Audience participation was encouraged as actors and playgoers worked through their class conflicts and racialized oppression. A “Member of Audience (rising),” is sure rioting will solve nothing, but ultimately black and white workers harmoniously work out their differences and in song invite the audience to join them in fighting for justice. The first cast was entirely composed of IWO members from Solidarity Lodge and its youth group, some of whom later enjoyed professional acting and dancing careers, most notably Butterfly McQueen and Robert Earl Jones, James Earl’s father. Thompson recalled Jones as a powerful actor, “but he never did his lines the same way twice. We’d see a different show every night.”

Don’t You Want to Be Free? was first performed at Solidarity Lodge’s own headquarters, ironically housed above a restaurant that refused to serve black people. It was then performed at the Harlem YWCA and then the same Finnish hall where Yokinen had earlier gotten into trouble for barring black people. At one 1939 performance, Hughes’s play was paired with Frank Wilson reading from God’s Trombones and Sierra Leonean Asadata Dafora “interpreting African Dance Rhythms.” Other plays offered by the Harlem Suitcase Theater were similar agit-prop vehicles, such as Hughes’s Blues to Now—and Then Some! and an opera with music by James P. Johnson and a book by Hughes. Thompson also fondly recalled satires of saccharine contemporary treatments of black America. Limitations of Life sent up the film Imitations of Life, while Em-fuehrer Jones got in a few digs at Berlin by way of Eugene O’Neill. The Suitcase Theater spawned other IWO experiments in leftist theater in Saint Louis, Los Angeles, Nashville, and elsewhere, and fostered other troupes such as the Newark Collective Theater and the Lincoln Players in Cleveland, the Trenton New Theatre, and the Montreal New Theatre. Don’t You Want to Be Free? was later performed at the black Atlanta University as well as in Nashville and New Orleans. Freedom Road was later performed by an IWO theater troupe at the Du Sable Center when Thompson relocated to Chicago.

Unfortunately, the Harlem Suitcase Theater did not last long, partially a victim of its own success. Thompson spoke of “the influence of commercial theater on people’s theater” as a factor that led to the Suitcase Theater’s rapid demise. “Everybody had his eyes, or her eyes, on going to Broadway. . . . Everybody either was going to Broadway physically or imitating Broadway in the type of production which you did. Why do we always have to be in overalls or aprons. We want to do musical comedy or we want to do Noel Coward.” She remembered how “some of the bitter arguments we had as the thing developed was the kind of plays we chose.” Some actors favored plays
such as those done by “Gilbert and Sullivan amateurs” over class- and race-conscious dramas. Such squabbles suggest the politics of respectability played out, even in Solidarity Lodge. The Suitcase Theater’s constitution admonished actors to “refrain from entering the theatre intoxicated or with liquor on your breath. Not only is it a bad reflection on your theatre, but annoying to the person playing opposite you.” Still, for a brief moment the Harlem Suitcase Theater offered exciting theater that also addressed the problems of the black and white working class.\textsuperscript{50}

The IWO utilized theater throughout its lifespan. “The IWO Treasure Chest of Tools” listed songs and plays available to lodges nationwide. During World War II, the OSS noted the effectiveness of theater troupes such as the Harlem People’s Art Group and the Polish People’s Theater in spreading the IWO’s message. The latter troupe “has never failed to impress upon its audience Poland’s need of Soviet friendship. A pageant entitled ‘Tribute to the Fighting Forces of Istria,’ written by IWO National Activities Director Carol Fijan, aroused the Istrian community to memorialize Congress and the President in behalf of the recognition of Tito.” During the war Slovak and Polish groups dramatized the Nazi massacre at Lidice, Czechoslovakia, and performed “a play dealing with the Polish partisans,” which was even “favorably accepted upon being performed in Catholic Church auditoriums.”\textsuperscript{51}

Following World War II, the dramatists were still at it, only now the targets were once again capitalists, returning the IWO to the kind of proletarian culture the Order’s founders had envisioned in the early 1930s. \textit{Let’s Get Together}, produced for the IWO Freedom Theatre, included “vehement attacks against private business” (in the words of the G-men tasked with keeping an eye on the Order) such as Pete Seeger’s “Banks of Marble” and another musical number, “Willie and the Bomb” (about the A bomb). A Ukrainian Society play, \textit{All Our Yesterdays}, was “a play with audience participation designed to turn the theatre into a political meeting.” Vignettes included a “Negro being killed by a police officer without provocation . . . interspersed with audience participation bits.” The play ends in triumph as the comrades win a court order against Americans Unlimited, “a fascist organization.” During World War II, the Ukrainians also presented a play glorifying pro-Soviet partisans. Not to be outdone, the SWS produced \textit{Keep Up!} by František Končinský, a “play on the suffering of women in war time,” set “in the future” during a war between “proletarian” Eastern Europe and “capitalist” Western Europe. Near play’s end several characters are cautiously optimistic that war will be abolished once and for all. But then “The United Warmongering States of America declared war on Europe.” “The play ends with one of the characters proclaiming ‘with inner fire’: ‘Yes, keep up! But this cry should not only be the cry of madmen—this cry must come from the entire wretched and oppressed world. . . . Comrades! Keep up!’ to which a voice from the audience replies: ‘We shall keep up!’” Another play by Končinský performed in Slovak was titled simply \textit{A Picture of Good Revolutions in History.}\textsuperscript{52}
The plots of these plays rehearsed for workers’ situations with which they were likely all too familiar—strikes, police brutality, the pettiness of bosses and landlords—and thus to some extent they were performing their own lives for their fellow workers on stage and in the audience. Surely Chicago steelworkers could have guessed the basic plot of Steel Strike. But plays such as Keep Up! and, more famously, Clifford Odets’s Waiting for Lefty, offered as a play to benefit strikers in Camden, were proletarian realism with a twist. In Odets’s play assembled workers were berated not to wait for Lefty, a savior from beyond the proscenium, who was not coming this or any other night, but to organize and agitate themselves. Moreover, working-class audience members were adept at fashioning and critiquing entertainments into usable models. Levine notes that during the Depression moviegoers were part of “an interactive, independent social entity,” and that in the 1950s television viewers in Boston turned implausible soap operas into satires through their mocking commentary. Similarly, IWO dramagoers were not passive recipients of the plays they watched. They had the option of seeing Hollywood movies or catching Jack Benny on the radio (and on other nights maybe they did). Their attendance at Communist or other left-wing entertainment venues thus already demonstrated some degree of choice and affinity with the message they were likely to hear. But the exhortations to “keep up!” urged attendees to bring their own thoughts and interpretations to the theater.  

While some of these postwar plays trod heavily on American toes, IWO organizers nevertheless endeavored to employ as raucous a spectacle as possible to attract recruits. A “National Training School” stressed seminars in “Rights of the Negro People, Equality,” but also honed lodges’ ability to harness lively entertainments to political campaigns and membership drives. Folk dance groups were to make appearances on Labor Day, May Day, and ethnic holidays such as Italians’ Columbus Day or Poles’ Kosciuszko Day. “When the lodge carries out a civic action it should look for interesting and colorful techniques,” teachers advised. “A chorus or mandolin orchestra in national costume on a sound truck could attract a lot of attention. . . . [T]he use of national costumes will multiply the effectiveness of the work.”  

The IWO sought to instill progressive Americanism in its members, but at other times it did not slight the ethnic particularities of its Italian, Polish, and other members.

“Enrich Our American National Culture”: Ethnic Pride Meets Radical Patriotism

Many Order activities privileged the valorization of ethnic culture over the assimilationist-homogenizing tendencies of such American pastimes as baseball games. The Order sponsored ethnic folk dancing troupes such as the Radischev Russian Folk Dancers or dance groups associated with the Emma
Lazarus Division, the women’s branch of the JPFO. Slovak IWO members composed “The Song of Hope,” with lyrics in Slovak and English, in praise of the ASC, while African American members of the Order’s Douglass-Lincoln Society sang songs such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in performances designed to valorize their often denigrated culture. In 1950 General Secretary Milgrom wrote to Kent, artist and IWO president, on the reprise of “the already famous Ukrainian cultural festivals” that “will express not only Ukrainian culture, but certain aspects of American culture, integrated into the Ukrainian festivals.” The melding of ethnic and American cultures and causes on these occasions was common. When the SWS held jubilee festivals to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary, the proceeds from concerts in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago featuring the Radischev dancers and other Slavic performers were dedicated to funding a memorial to Roosevelt in Banska Bystrica, site of the Slovak Uprising against Nazi occupation.\(^5\)

Other times, more explicitly ethnic agendas were pursued, as when the JPFO memorialized the Warsaw Ghetto martyrs on the anniversary of the uprising or took part in a Polo Grounds pageant celebrating “The Birth of the Jewish State.” SWS lodges held a bazaar to benefit \(\text{Ludový denník}\). Radio listeners in western Pennsylvania enjoyed old country music broadcast on SWS’s Slovak Radio Hour; during World War II, the SWS received a letter from West Homestead, “Please play a polka for Mrs. Marie Pavasko,” as her son was serving in the military. During the war, Detroit African Americans could listen to IWO radio programs on “Negro history, folklore, etc.” too. The IWO expanded these ethnic appeals when it created the People’s Radio Foundation, which pledged “Freedom of the air! Honest labor news!” The People’s Radio Foundation promised to “chase out the black cats of radio censorship on Friday the 13th of December, 1946,” by presenting “three radio plays that were banned from the air,” including one billed as “A Smashing Attack upon Lynching Which Is Taboo on the Networks.” As the Cold War heated up, in 1947 the Slav Congress, too, planned a radio program for western Pennsylvania called “Keep America Free.” Earlier, it had been easier for radical Slavs to get a hearing. During the war, for example, the People’s Radio Foundation had broadcast a complimentary life of Josip Broz Tito, liberally quoting Adamic on the need for the United States to continue supporting the Yugoslav partisan leader.\(^6\)

Affidavits supplied by IWO members indicate a privileging of the ethnic cultural offerings of their lodges. This was not, however, a rejection of American culture but a refashioning of what American culture ideally could mean: a multiethnic, politically progressive and racially inclusive nation of nations. Such a capacious vision of America, though, was in itself often regarded as dangerously radical. Into the 1940s, many old-stock Americans still questioned the fitness of Jewish, Slavic, and Italian Americans, while more stridently denouncing African American and Hispanic calls for
inclusion. Proudly celebrating one’s non-WASP heritage in an organization that asserted the necessity of racial equality was an attempt to change the terms of what it meant to be a real American.  

Some lodges balanced attention to Slavic folk singing and dancing with American sports teams—baseball and basketball most prominently. While it is difficult to determine whether some younger white ethnics chose not to join the IWO due to its emphasis on Old World culture, we do know that within the Order both Americanized and ethnic entertainments were on offer. While IWO officials already in the early 1940s were lamenting the difficulty in retaining the second generation, and the Radischev Folk Dancers may have had a hard time competing with Frank Sinatra for the loyalty of some younger members, thousands of other American-born women and men enrolled in Jewish schools, Italian theater troupes, and Polish dance circles.

Moreover, ethnic and American cultures were seen by many members as mutually reinforcing. Members frequently spoke of the way ethnic theater and song enhanced their appreciation of American culture. Alexander Smoley attested that his “principal interest is the Russian cultural program in which the lodge engages,” citing his participation in choral, dance, and drama groups. He added, though, “I firmly believe that the IWO is helping to enrich our American national culture by preserving for Americans of foreign extraction the cultures of the nations from which so many Americans have sprung. It is because of that conviction that I have assisted in organizing in our lodge children’s dramatic activities in the Russian language and costume.” Lewis Marks asserted that the Jewish Children’s Schools his lodge ran taught not just Yiddish literature and Jewish history but “an appreciation of the heritage and contributions of Jews to American history.” His lodge’s programs also participated in Brotherhood Week celebrations warning of the twin perils of anti-Semitism and racial discrimination and segregation, so his brand of Americanism likely did not mesh with that of HUAC luminaries such as Rankin. Anna Mazurak believed the Ukrainian choral and drama groups in which she participated and similar programs “of other I.W.O. lodges are adding to the national culture of the American people by preserving the culture of the various national groups which make up the bulk of our people.” A Russian member noted that his lodge’s choral, dance, and dramatic groups performed at veterans’ hospitals among other places, asserting, “We believe that in helping to preserve and develop our appreciation of our national origins, our lodge is also helping to enrich the content of American culture.”

A New Yorker echoed this belief: “While we take pride in our loyalty to, and love for, the United States, we are also proud of our national origin and of the great people from which we have sprung. Through our lodge we help to keep alive an appreciation of the contributions which the Carpathian
Russians have made and are making to this country.” Slavic Americans were, to borrow Roediger and Barrett’s term, “inbetween peoples” and certainly benefited to a far greater extent than non-European Americans from the largess of the New Deal and other privileges that came with being “white on arrival.” Still, in a deepening Cold War, Russian and other Slavic customs and people were often viewed suspiciously. And older IWO members likely remembered it was not that long ago that sociologists sneered, “A Pole can live in dirt that would kill a white man.”

In such a context, IWO music groups were some of the few places working-class Slavs might gain celebrity. Louis Oroby, who said he had been a “worker” at the Hotel New Yorker for fourteen years, also noted, “I am very proud of my activities as a singer in the nationally famous Radischev Choir. There is not a corner in the City of New York, scarcely a single church where I did not sing with the Radischev Choir during the last world war. I owe to the IWO the wonderful experience that I have had in the cultural activities of the Order.” Ewa Morawska notes that it was only through service to one’s ethnic parish or fraternal that Slavic immigrants gained status, respect, and honors “mainstream” society withheld from working people. Such internal status markers were provided to progressive immigrants via performing groups such as the Radischev Choir, which entertained at many IWO galas.

Milton Schiff of the JPFO’s Tom Paine Lodge (a telling blend of progressive American patriotism and Jewish identity) wrote that he belonged to the JPFO’s Fraternal Songsters, which performed at Jewish hospitals in the Los Angeles area. Max Lange attested that his lodge raised funds for Mount Sinai and affirmed the JPFO’s Jewish schules, which gave children “an opportunity to learn the history, traditions and culture of the Jewish people and to integrate their background with their studies in American history and literature so as to make them well rounded citizens.”

Hispanic and African American members appreciated not just the leisure-time opportunities the IWO provided but also the expansive space the Order opened up for them on occasions of inclusion that valorized them as worthy Americans in ways few other 1940s venues fully afforded. Another Los Angeles resident, Catherine Ales, spoke approvingly of her lodge’s “programs of Mexican culture, especially for the children.” In an era when denigration of Hispanic Americans was widespread, and only a few years after the travesties of the Zoot Suit Riots and the framing of Mexican Americans in the Sleepy Lagoon murder case, Ales asserted the dignity of Mexican American culture, noting her IWO lodge annually “takes part with other organizations in Cinco de Mayo festivities celebrating Mexico’s national holiday.” Peter Moreno of Brooklyn likewise declared that in his lodge of “first and second generation Puerto Ricans,” “while we yield to no one in our love for the United States, we maintain ties of affection for our native Puerto Rico and its people. Our lodge plays an important role in maintaining our...
national hereditary culture. . . . We teach our young ones to respect and honor the land of their origin.” African American James Moorer of Jersey City, too, appreciated the venues his IWO lodge afforded him for learning of black peoples’ contributions to a nation that still relegated him to third-class citizenship.62

Certain ethnic groups within the IWO ran their own summer camps, such as the JPFO’s Camp Kinderland, Finnish camps in Michigan, the Russians’ Arow Farm on Long Island, and a Jewish summer camp run by the JPFO near Brampton, Ontario, for Detroit-area children. Although these camps also often welcomed African American children, sometimes groups balked at sharing their camps and thus diluting the ethnic cultural aspect of camp programs. Even American activities such as baseball or basketball occurred in the cultural milieu of radicalism, as when Camp Wocolona, as noted, promised “Baseball and Revolution.” And sometimes baseball occurred in interracial competition or among fellow ethnics still ostracized by Major League Baseball, as when black or Puerto Rican lodges fielded teams, but not in the good old, whites-only way.63

In such circumstances assimilation did not occur in a straight line. IWO members, especially American-born members often still marginalized as not quite belonging, endeavored to reclaim American heritage for themselves. Certainly in the 1940s this was the perception of many “mainstream” commentators regarding African Americans and Hispanics, but even Jewish and Italian IWO members were aware that congressmen dismissed their groups as “mongrelizers” of the nation.

During World War II, the space for the IWO to appear in such national costume opened up, as calls for black civil rights, cooperation with the Soviet Union, and providing for the needs of the forgotten man and woman gained credence with a broader public. Ukrainian member John Myketew boasted of his success recruiting “Negro” members to the Order and went on to propose an accordion orchestra that would “be dressed up in Russian Cossacks uniform, play Red Army songs. You see, I think that by July Fourth [the] Red Army will celebrate Victory over Hitler so we the delegates also will celebrate.” In this instance the ethnic particularism of Slavic members, and valorization of Cossack uniforms, tenuously meshed with wartime patriotism. Progressive Americans could still openly celebrate the Soviet allies on July Fourth for a few more years.64

The wartime alliance also afforded an opportunity for the IWO’s Liberty Singing Society to appear at an IWO Four Freedoms rally in Detroit’s Belle Isle Park. Attendees heard addresses by state senator Nowak, UAW organizer Paul Boatini, as well as African Americans Reverend Hill and Ferdinand Smith (of the National Maritime Union), calling for the opening of a second front in Europe and an investigation of the Detroit race riot that had begun in Belle Isle Park two months previously. An OSS agent noted, “The Liberty
Singing Society, a well-known Detroit leftwing group, specialized in Yiddish folk songs and in songs from the Soviet Union. They sang this time a song in praise of General Voroshilov.\footnote{65}

In 1943 Slovaks paid homage to an egalitarian world with “Calypso Song of ‘The Common Man.’” As noted in Chapter 3, Pindar’s salute to a multi-ethnic assemblage of “just plain Americans” was a radical notion when conservative politicians such as Bilbo and Rankin exorciated blacks, Jews, and “Dagos” bent on “mongrelizing” America as part of an ostensible Communist plot. The connection between Trinidad and progressive Slavs was not as exceptional as it seems. By World War II, militants were immersed in interracial social networks. \textit{The Sunday Worker} advertised the grand opening of Harlem’s Club Calypso alongside ads for a Robeson concert for the JPFO (at which the 300-voice JPFO chorus as well as Jewish and Palestinian folk dancers performed) and a Weenie Roast for the Fighting South to benefit black and white striking tobacco workers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Black members of the IWO celebrated Negro History Week with a program of drama and music, arguing “the Negro people should not learn less about others, but more about themselves.” On the bill with African American entertainers were Slavic folk singers such as Vera Nickoloff. The president of the black lodges said his group “hoped to contribute, in however small a way, to the over-all objective of complete equality for the Negro people, economically, socially and culturally.”\footnote{66}

In 1944 Marcantonio, president of the Garibaldi Society, joined Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Communist New York councilman Davis, and the National Maritime Union’s Smith in sponsoring a “Negro Freedom Rally.” “Victory over Fascism—Jim Crowism—Anti-Semitism,” ran the rally’s poster. It also proclaimed: “Equality Everywhere—in the armed forces.—Jobs for All.—The right to vote.” Organizers promised “speakers of national prominence, great artists, and a stirring new pageant ‘New World A-Coming,’” featuring Duke Ellington and dancer-choreographer Pearl Primus. Ellington had earlier performed at the Party’s 1930 second annual interracial dance classic—itself a subversive act so far as Jim Crow America was concerned. In between musical sets, Foster of the CPUSA spoke to the dancers. Such mixing of class-conscious instruction and entertainment by celebrities was frequent, as when Hughes, already making a name for himself in the Harlem Renaissance, recited with other poets at the Third Annual International Red Poets’ Nite Dance Bacchanal in December 1928 or when during World War II Woody Guthrie serenaded a Brighton Beach American Labor Party Spring Festival along with the “Stage for Action Players” and an appearance by the ASC’s Krzycki. As Denning notes, the Popular Front era enabled many leftist pivots within the laboring of popular culture, and such celebrations indicate that even mainstream culture could be reappropriated in multiracial, left-wing spaces for progressive purposes.\footnote{67}
Likewise, Robeson joined Smith and others in sponsoring together with “Spanish organizations” and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee a Fiesta Republicana in honor of “the valiant Spanish people who are sabotaging Franco’s aid to Hitler.” The Fiesta, slated for a park in Queens, offered “a colorful program of Spanish and American entertainment, dancing, games and outstanding speakers.” In June 1939 a similar “Gran Acontecimiento Artístico Cultural” (Grand Cultural Artistic Event) was celebrated by the IWO’s Club Obrero Español, with flamenco artists, ballet dancers, singers, and guitarists performing on behalf of the Committee for Democracy in Spain. A Detroit “Spanish Fiesta” hosted by IWO lodges and the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was crashed by an FBI agent, who reported that the hundred or so in attendance was a “chiefly German” crowd enjoying “plenty of German music and dancing.” The affair was “supposed to be for the benefit of the ‘boys’ who fought in Spain.”

After the war, antifascist interracialism continued, as when the national leader of the Russian society urged local lodges to book a talk by Charles Burrows, an American-born black man brought up in Moscow. Burrows was traveling the country in 1949, lecturing on “The Fight for Peace.” The IWO made the case for demilitarization in the Cold War, but under less auspicious circumstances than when it had called for an antifascist UN coalition a few years earlier.

As Chapter 3 demonstrates, this interracial socializing sometimes ran into the problem of “white chauvinism.” Complaints from black Order members in Detroit were sent to headquarters about Myketew’s condescension, suggesting racial harmony in the IWO was sometimes more aspirational than actual. As early as 1932, an Italian man complained of “white chauvinism” at a Communist summer camp near Boston, a charge repeated in 1949 by a Bronx member of the JPFO regarding the dearth of black guests or staff at IWO’s Camp Lakeland. Of course, such problems were more likely to arise in an organization committed to interracialism than in a more conservative ethnic fraternal society. There, black attendance at one’s lodge was simply unthinkable, and thus no squabbles over “white chauvinism” ever arose.

The IWO’s entertainments, however, never exhibited the racial myopia other leftist revelers sometimes displayed. As late as 1932 in Milwaukee, for example, the Socialist Party advertised for its chief fund-raiser, an annual winter carnival minstrel show. The Socialist Milwaukee Leader noted that the beloved Socialist minstrel shows dated back to a 1904 fund-raiser for the Socialist Educational Fund featuring prominent politicians such as Emil Seidel, later Milwaukee’s first Socialist mayor and 1912 vice-presidential running mate of Eugene Debs. The Leader urged readers to attend the 1932 minstrel show, featuring local Socialist luminaries such as Eugene Krzycki donning blackface and grass skirts to perform as “King Boola-Boo’s Fiji Guard.” The year’s winter carnival featured “Original Georgia Minstrels
Captured by Cannibals—The Quintessence of Old-Time Minstrelsy.” The advertisement promised “A Stage Full of Savages—Burrurr!” and also noted “ice cream and candies” would be provided by the Young People’s Socialist League, a reminder that minstrel shows in the early twentieth century were often regarded as the height of gentility. Amateur blackface artist Eugene Krzycki was the son of national Socialist Party chairman Leo Krzycki, who in 1942 would become the inaugural president of the ASC. The Slav Congress would exhibit greater racial sensitivity in staging its entertainments, which often linked performances by African American entertainers such as Robeson with appearances by troupes such as the Radischev Russian Dancers. The Slav Congress also forcefully advocated for African American civil rights, so perhaps the annual burnt-cork winter carnivals can serve as a reminder of the complicated embrace of whiteness even among progressive white ethnics, who advocated equality in some contexts while also unproblematically conveying racist stereotypes on other stages. Still, for all their many racial blind spots, there is no evidence of IWO members enacting minstrel shows, and it is difficult to imagine them doing so.\(^71\)

The IWO forged a celebratory interracialism where members saluted their Slavic, Italian, and Jewish cultures but also took part in social affairs and political rallies with black and Hispanic leftists. Ukrainian accordion and mandolin orchestras were twinned with African American performers. In 1941 Robeson shared the bill with the Radischev Russian Folk Dancers on IWO Day at the Civilian and National Defense Exposition (Figure 4.1). Following the war, the IWO joined other black and white organizations in supporting a Robeson concert on behalf of unionized clerical workers in Panama and that local’s antidiscrimination program, while the Slav Congress featured Robeson alongside Slavic luminaries such as Adamic at its gala People’s Festival. In 1950 the JPFO and the Douglass-Lincoln Society turned out in droves—at least sixteen thousand—for a Robeson concert demanding an end to segregation and enactment of an antilynching bill. Greene of the JPFO exclaimed, “Sitting side by side, Negro and white, Jew and Christian, all brothers and sisters of one big united fraternal family. What more effective demonstration of genuine democracy in action could you find anywhere in America!” That year Robeson teamed with the JPFO and Michigan Slav Congress to raise funds to send the children of Willie McGee to Camp Kinderland.\(^72\)

Such interracial fun could not go unanswered by officialdom. In 1946 interracial dancing, singing, and acting appalled the FBI. An agent was aghast that at an ASC “Win the Peace” rally, a Russian woman in a Red Army uniform kissed Robeson. Informants also alerted the bureau that dance classes at the IWO’s Detroit Polish Club were actually indoctrinating the eighteen students, for the teacher was “teaching them how to secure new members by propaganda, sports, dances and politics.” A similar IWO dance
class at Detroit’s Slavonia Club was also more nefarious than it appeared, for “a considerable number of youths are drawn by the pretext of dancing.”

Even by the FBI’s suspicious lights, not all IWO dances bore such subversive fruit. An informant reported on a social evening held in 1939 by Detroit’s Patrick Henry Lodge in the back of Joe’s Barber Shop. “Very poor crowd and very little spending of money,” he wrote. “There were about 20 persons there. Sold very little beer. Everybody was saying—‘I wonder what’s the matter with this party? Where is everybody?’” He concluded, “This Party was a flop in every sense of the word.” Another 1939 IWO party in Detroit drew an interracial crowd (which attracted the notice of Detroit police), but the gist of the meeting was less exciting: “Whiskey, beer and sandwiches were on sale. For nearly three hours the crowd sat around and told smutty stories.”

Even if the content of such meetings was more Rotary Club than revolution, the IWO nevertheless was deemed subversive. In response, dozens of Order members offered affidavits defending the group for its interracial solidarity. Lodges that engaged in Ukrainian and Polish dance recitals and art
exhibits also held celebrations during Negro History Week and Brotherhood Week and sponsored interracial youth activities.75

Many black members affirmed this “complete and sincere equality of treatment with member of other races” at lodge venues such as Camp Robin Hood. A black woman from Los Angeles appreciated the interracial “picnics, socials, lectures and many kinds of educational activities” that promoted “perfect unity.” To many red-baiting congressmen, such joyous expressions of “social equality” were nothing short of un-American. The most prominent African American member of the IWO, Robeson, stated that the Order had been placed on the Attorney General’s List of Subversive Organizations because of its work to end segregation: “In our great Order we live and practice equality and brotherhood of man all the year ’round. . . . That’s what Tom Clark, Rankin, and other hatchet men of reaction don’t like about the IWO. Their . . . blacklists are aimed at the people’s organizations fighting Jim Crow and segregation, fighting American-style fascism, fighting for peace.”76

Leftists sometimes leavened indignation with satire. Detroit police reported on the 1949 New Year’s Eve social of the Michigan CP, an event likely attended by some IWO members. The officer reporting on the red revels seemed alarmed to note that of 290 attendees, 120 were “Negroes.” The policeman also reported, “During intermission, a pumpkin (ridiculing the HUAC spy investigation) was auctioned off, with auctioneer Harry Boskey stating that a secret formula was contained within.” When the winner claimed his pumpkin, “Formula disclosed ‘Season’s Greetings.’”77

Michigan Communists, of course, were riffing off Whittaker Chambers’s infamous hollowed-out pumpkin, which contained, or so an ambitious young Congressman Nixon asserted, microfilmed proof that Communist spies had infiltrated the State Department. But here the encoded message—“Season’s Greetings”—came not from Alger Hiss but advocates of civil rights and strong unions. Leftists knew their activities were often caught under the panopticon of surveillance, so perhaps the pumpkin was a subtle dig at the undercover policeman in attendance, not just a morale booster for besieged activists. When activists knew they were being spied on by the “un-American” state around the clock perhaps they had to have a sense of humor.78

Robert Putnam has lamented the decline of associational life in an America where everyone “bowls alone,” without considering the coercive role anticommunism played in ending the party for politically engaged Americans.79 To be sure, by 1950 ethnic fraternal lodges, even nonradical ones, faced stiff competition from television and Hollywood as they tried to keep their bands, choruses, and theater societies going. While the triumph of mass consumer culture played a role in ending the participatory theater troupes, mandolin societies, and sports leagues of ethnic America, the progressive, counterhegemonic variety acts of groups such as the IWO were not simply victims of assimilation or television.
As IWO members built interracial alliances while working for civil rights, a more peaceful world, and workplace justice, they often found it difficult to find a place in which to have their fun. Slavs who screened films praising the Soviet Union often faced enmity from more conservative ethnic peers. The secretary of a Ukrainian lodge in Edwardsville, Pennsylvania, wrote the national office, “Ever since we showed a film Mannerheim Line in February 1941 we are attacked from every corner now. We also received a note to move from the hall after May 15th . . . but we hope that the storm will pass, sometime.” With Moscow still widely condemned for its nonaggression pact with the Nazis, and any thought of an alliance still a distant dream, a Soviet film defending the Red Army assault on Finland was a tough sell for coal-country Ukrainians.

Once the United States and the Soviets became wartime allies, no matter how tentatively, IWO bookings for films defending Russia began to improve. As an OSS agent noted in 1944, “The National Film Division of the IWO . . . is the largest distributor in the United States of Soviet films.” During the war the Film Division ran a “Special Summer Offer” to all lodges, offering feature films at $25 per showing, or $22.50 if three or more films were ordered. Lodges could choose among nine “Films for Victory” such as Ukraine in Flames and Leningrad Music Hall. In May 1945 Milgrom was informed that large crowds had attended screenings of Battle for Russia in Carnegie and Homestead, Pennsylvania. The following year, however, with the war ended and the Soviet Union rapidly relegated to enemy nation, a Detroit screening of Battle for Russia had to be canceled because a hall could not be obtained.

Films praising the Soviet Union had always offended many in the ethnic communities in which IWO lodges were situated, as Edwardsville Ukrainians could attest, and perhaps the wartime alliance had only been a respite from such hostility. For the IWO such blackouts became increasingly common. While Slovaks in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, still managed to find a place to screen a film about orphans in postwar Czechoslovakia, when lodges sought to show films more explicitly praising the Soviet Union they had trouble finding a hall. In 1947 Flint and Lackawanna, New York, lodges encountered difficulties securing a place to screen films. Lackawanna wrote, “Most of the hall administrators are Poles and (members of) the American Legion, and Russia is not in good with relations with America . . . . Here the reaction runs high everywhere.” The Russian society president wrote back agreeing that reaction and hostility to Moscow were in the ascendant, but arguing “now more than ever it is necessary to demand that such Soviet moving pictures are shown to Americans.” He was confident when viewers saw the picture, “they [would] palpably see themselves that the Soviet Union and the Soviet people do not prepare for war.”
The IWO's defense of the Soviet Union and its other foreign-policy positions were some of its most unpalatable policies so far as more conservative Americans were concerned. Sympathy toward the Soviet Union engendered much public hostility, and eventually government prosecution, but IWO advocacy of freedom for colonized African and Asian peoples also was out of step with conservative Americans and ruffled State Department feathers. It is to the IWO's contentious activism regarding international relations that we now turn.