Academic convention dictates that the 1930s marked the high tide of cultural representations both of US workers and of the Communist Party (CPUSA) and its politics. Overshadowed by journalistic accounts like Eugene Lyons’s 1941 polemic *The Red Decade*, subsequent scholars were at pains to distance themselves from a conspiratorial interpretation. First, they suggested a significant gap between the CPUSA and the literary figures it influenced. Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1961), along with Walter Rideout’s *The Radical Novel in America* (1954), provided a liberal alternative to Cold War exposés of red fiction and rehashes of Lyons’s arguments. More recently, an emphasis on cultural ‘history from below’ has unearthed those not included in the pantheon of what Josephine Herbst saw as the New York-based ‘head boys’. Such approaches were given new impetus with the publication of Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996) and Alan Wald’s *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (2002).¹ Although still concerned with the 1930s as a central ‘proletarian moment’, Laura Hapke uses the recent *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction*² to show that the representation of the US working class has a long literary history.

Whether these accounts have influenced the popular consensus is another matter. Scholarly works make the simplistic notion of a ‘red decade’, characterised by Stalinist infiltration of the arts and intelligentsia, increasingly untenable (sometimes to an excessively Stalinophile extent). Yet these shifts in the academic consensus seldom

¹ See Barnfield 2003. (Wald also discusses the methodology for this process of excavation in his Wald 2000.) Like many of its author’s essays, the latter paper stresses the need to move away from the 1930s almost altogether, by treating that decade’s literary radicalism and worker-writers as part of a longer continuum of the US Left.

² Hapke 2001.
register in wider society. Thus, obituaries, textbooks and cinematic sources as diverse as Kathy Bates’s TV movie *Dash and Lilly* (1999) and Abel Ferrara’s *The Funeral* (1996) tend to reproduce the dominant narrative, prising apart the ideologue and the creative spirit at the expense of explaining the complex interplay between art and politics. (Matters are further confused by the mainstream pundits who casually suggest that the 1999 dot.com crash means we are reliving the 1930s, but that is another story.)

Fortunately, two new works go some way to breaking the deadlock. For Andrew Hemingway, the task in hand is that of producing an account of the visual arts equivalent to Denning’s and Wald’s generational biographies. Meanwhile, Paula Rabinowitz works with less clearly defined materials in order to present the big picture she sees as a hidden masternarrative of class, race and gender in the United States.

Whereas the literary ‘Thirties’ forms the basis for an extensive body of scholarship, albeit one often concerned with a ‘canon’ of familiar writers, less is written about the analogous situation in the visual arts. Hemingway’s sense of frustration regarding this is apparent when his commentaries start on the second exhibition in a particular series, the extant records of its predecessor having been lost (e.g. p. 47). By revisiting this fragmentary history, *Artists on the Left* goes beyond much of the existing literature by delivering what is potentially a foundational text for the study of the relationship between the US Communist Left and the visual arts. It is no accident that the title of this volume so closely resembles that of Aaron’s seminal work. In common with the early literary accounts, Hemingway’s volume can serve as an important starting point for considering both the relationship between cultural production and the struggle for socialism, and the artistic methods for best representing US workers.

A key strength of Hemingway’s work is a refusal to be confined to the ‘Depression Decade’ itself. Often the appeal of those narratives that focus on that specific period, and certainly a core theme of mainstream readings, is that the upsurge in proletarian fiction and communist commitment on the part of writers was the product of extreme economic conditions. While there is a rational kernel to this, primarily when looking at those whose fleeting radical loyalties coincided with the slump, the problem with this account is that it ignores the broader continuum from within which the 1930s cultural Left operated. On the surface, there may be sound reasons to treat the Nazi-Soviet Pact or US entry into the Second World War as viable points of closure, as this was when many adherents broke with the CPUSA. They certainly indicate the disastrous influence of the Soviet Union and the official Communist parties on independent working-class politics. However, this focus on or preoccupation with a particular decade tells only part of the story. The proportion of members and fellow travellers who stayed the course through the war years or McCarthy era also have a story to tell. Like Hapke, Wald and others, Hemingway is committed to working with an adequate timeframe to make a sound judgement as to artistic achievement. He finds a logical starting point in the founding of the magazine *New Masses* in 1926 and