Chapter 2
Populism, romanticism and Frank Capra

POPULISM IN AMERICA

In the United States the weakness of socialism as an ideology has frequently been noted. Numerous reasons have been advanced, including the absence of feudalism, the influence of the frontier, the relative affluence of the American working class, federalism, and the extensive ethnic and racial diversity. Arguably the emphasis of American dominant ideology on political equality has also hampered efforts to organise Americans along class lines. Jerome Karabel has pointed to what he sees as the extraordinary power of the doctrine of ‘popular sovereignty’ in American political development, while others have stressed the importance of notions of political equality and democracy to American national identity. Leon Samson, writing in the mid-thirties, saw the ‘pseudosocialistic’ idea of American democracy, and the belief in individual upward mobility, as overriding and concealing the reality of class in America, and he also cited Walt Whitman’s poetic vision, his song of America, as representative of the culture’s relative class unconsciousness.1

American political rhetoric has instead borrowed from the ideas and motifs of populism—both the particular tradition based on agrarian protest and the more amorphous cluster of ideas centred around the opposition of elites and ‘the people’. More particularly, populism in the United States has historically been associated with the land, and with agricultural communities threatened by, and resisting, the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. In a discussion of American populism, MacRae sees it as both reactionary, looking backward to the untamed virgin west and to the pastoral vision of Thomas Jefferson, and also radical, in that it
favours change away from the inequalities of bureaucracy towards a simpler, more fraternal life. The short-lived populist movement at the end of the nineteenth century pressed for government action, but had a moral rather than an ideological perspective on power in America, believing in the possibility of a rectification of elite corruption and expropriation without any fundamental change in the system. The populists were critical of urban interests, bankers, big business, machine politicians and intellectuals, and much of this demonology is also characteristic of Frank Capra’s ‘middle period’ films.

Like the turn-of-the-century socialists, populists felt that the ‘interests’ had expropriated the wealth that rightly belonged to the producing classes. But while socialists favoured industrialisation, fundamental change and a coherent theory of history populists loathed the bureaucracy that they associated with industrial concentration, and talked of reform through the simple device of replacing corrupt and conspiratorial elites with representatives of the truer, agricultural America.²

Richard Hofstadter, in The Age of Reform, examined the reform period in the United States from the 1890s, and the era of Populism and Progressivism, until the New Deal of the 1930s. He saw the People’s (or Populist) Party of the 1890s as only a ‘heightened expression’ of ‘a kind of popular impulse that is endemic in American political culture’, and stressed the impact on the national folklore of generations of Americans being brought up to revere rural life. Writing in the 1950s, Hofstadter saw Populist thinking as surviving as an ‘undercurrent of provincial resentments, popular and “democratic” rebelliousness and suspiciousness, and nativism’, and Progressivism as an attempt to restore ‘a type of economic individualism and political democracy’ that the corporations and corrupt political machines were seen to have destroyed. The two movements of the turn of the century were seen as reflecting a native response to the waves of immigration that fed the growth of urban political machines. The goal of revolt was not social democracy or social equality but ‘greater opportunities’.

Hofstadter recognised the role of this ‘liberal tradition in American politics’, from Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy through to the New Deal, in humanising the working of the system, yet he was critical of the ‘Populist—Progressive tradition’ (of 1890 to 1917) for its moral certainty, and its tendency to blame
conspiratorial forces for the evils of society. In addition he traced the origins of what he calls the ‘cranky pseudo-conservatism’ of the early fifties to the illiberal side of the earlier tradition, linking this development from reform to reaction to certain constant American tendencies, particularly in the Middle West and the South.

Hofstadter saw continuities in the American reform tradition, but he stressed those aspects of the New Deal that represented a sharp break with the past; with its concern with a new state role in relief and in the labour market, the new administration had a new ‘social-democratic tinge’. He saw Franklin D. Roosevelt as uninterested in the Progressive issues of bossism and corruption; instead the early years of the New Deal were concerned with the National Recovery Administration scheme involving cooperation between business and government. The 1930s saw the triumph of the forces that populists had resisted, particularly big government and business, and the emergence of a strong role for intellectuals in Washington.³

Yet more recent scholarship on the Populist movement tends to stress its democratic basis and its concern with ‘structural reform of the American economic system’. To Goodwyn the movement of farmers from West and South represented a challenge to the era of triumphant capitalism; rather than stressing the tendencies to conspiracy and anti-Semitism, this perspective sees the People’s Party and the bodies that preceded it as an essentially forward-looking ‘economic crusade’. Other writers have also drawn attention to populist themes as part of a progressive tradition in American history, and to the recurring notion that elites have usurped the power of the people. But such writers also admit that the tradition has been prone to reactionary bursts of nativism, despite the legacy of the ‘gospel of cooperation’ of the late nineteenth century. A student of the Dust Bowl migrants to California in the 1930s refers to the changing political colour of the populist perspective since the turn of the century; by the 1930s, he argues, many ‘plain folk’ remained sympathetic to ‘appeals on behalf of the common man or against the “interests”’, but ‘they responded with equal vigour to symbols that recalled a white Protestant and intensely patriotic vision of Americanism’.⁴

Laclau found the notion of populism to be ‘elusive’, and one recent reviewer of the American debate remarks that ‘populism is a slippery concept’, and refers to ‘the basic political ambivalence
at the heart of the American populist tradition’. In historical terms
the idea suggests a co-operative mass movement demanding
economic reform, and the left in recent years has—in the absence of
any wide class or ideological consciousness—used local issues to
build community politics. The imaginative world of Capra’s films
includes the demonology of populist rhetoric—the distrust of big
business, finance and intellectuals—without offering any relevant
alternative agenda. Good neighbourliness is not a serious answer
either to depression or to corruption and lack of democracy. Co-
operative action—central to the movement of the 1890s and even
to Huey Long’s campaigns in the 1930s—is not a narrative option
in Capra’s world, any more than it is in American cinema as a
generality.

Yet Capra’s heroes are men of the people in the symbolic if not
the conventionally representative sense. What they really represent
is a democratic ideal of America invoked throughout this century
by those outside ‘normal politics’ who wish to call on the notion
of ‘the people’—with or without rural overtones—to attack the
policies, if rarely the status, of powerful elites. The roots of
populism in action in America are as a popular movement to
redistribute power and resources, and in a country without an
established language of socialism this remains a powerful
mobilising ideology; but the language is available to all, and the
right may find of particular use the myths and symbolism
associated with a ‘golden age’ of given roles and structured
relationships.

The case of Huey Long in the 1930s demonstrates the power of
populism as a mobilising ideology related to issues of
redistribution and powerlessness, although Long’s demagoguery
also illustrates the lack of real analysis in the populist critique of
power. Populist leaders arrive in positions of power with a
constituency, an enemy and a mandate, but without—certainly in
Long’s case—an analysis. Rising to power on the resentment of the
rural poor against the ruling families of Louisiana, Long was
unrestrained by any programme or ideology, and he seems to have
represented, along with Father Charles Coughlin, the tendency of
1930s populist politics to degenerate into authoritarianism.
Writing in the mid-1930s V.F. Calverton in Modern Quarterly
warned of the rise of an American fascism controlled by
industrialists and bankers but exploiting the fears and aspirations
of the petit-bourgeoisie: ‘Although the farmer opposed corporate
capitalism and baited Wall Street, he never wished to abolish private property or the profit system.\textsuperscript{6}

Residues of populist sentiment recur in subsequent politics and culture. In the 1950s liberal anti-communist opinion saw the emergence of Senator Joseph McCarthy on to the national political scene as a reflection of a dangerously proto-fascist mass phenomenon.\textsuperscript{7} They stressed links in McCarthy’s support and rhetoric with the agrarian and mid-western ‘left’ populism of the 1890s, and saw the phenomenon as a threat to the party politics and civil liberties of ‘normal’ Schumpeterian competition between elites, and to pluralist politics. The ‘radical right’ was seen as threatening the liberal tradition that checked the powers of majorities. In fact, while McCarthy certainly drew on populist motifs in his speeches—notably in his condemnation of those ‘born with a silver spoon in their mouths’ as guilty of betrayal—his main theme was that of anti-communism, and his crucial political support came from business and political elites.\textsuperscript{8}

Certainly the New Left counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s was in part a protest against big, dehumanising corporations, and against universities which prepared students for them. Out of that period also came the revival of ecological and environmental ideas, of self-sufficiency and the commune. Hollywood discovered the new youth culture with the success of films that reflected a fantasised retreat from contemporary reality. In Easy Rider (1969) the protagonists pay homage to the idea of a purer, more communal America before they continue their mercenary journey, while Alice’s Restaurant (1969) in particular captures an imperfect attempt to create a human scale maternal refuge from the wider society. On the right some analysts saw 1968 as the beginning of a fruitful alliance between conservative elites and a populist ‘Middle American’ reaction against a liberal establishment.\textsuperscript{9} This revival of a conservative populist rhetoric, stretching from Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan and beyond, was reflected in film with periodic success for vigilante themes, in which plebiscitary male leaders grapple with the results of liberal failure and betrayal.

The American democratic structure has arguably been less insulated from popular ideas, values and culture than traditionally more stratified countries where national identity is less clearly associated with democratic ideas. Precisely because of the broad ideological consensus that covers American elite politics, third
party and non-party movements of right and left have often raided the same larder of ideas. Seeking to break through, they have validated their position by reference to the gap between elite values and attitudes and those of the particular ‘community’ or populace that such groups represent, or claim to represent. In doing so they have also made use of the poorly integrated cluster of categories and values associated with populism. Among such recurring motifs have been anti-intellectualism, the notion or myth of some lost ‘golden age’ in which life was purer and simpler, a reverence and nostalgia for the land and those who lived or live closest to it, and —perhaps most anachronistically in a society where private enterprise is as sanctified a notion as democracy itself—a distrust of money power. They also, in contradistinction to socialist ideology, put faith in notions of ‘common sense’, biblical morality, and leaders who can represent—or sometimes personify—these values.

While references to rural America in recent American politics have been largely symbolic—for example, Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on both morality and his rural origins in opposition to the Washington of Watergate in 1976—residues of populist politics remain. Rightist groups in the early eighties invoked the supposedly traditional values of the past, including ‘the work ethic, the neighborhood, and patriarchal sex roles’, while local left movements since the 1960s have also organised around issues of neighbourhood and community, rather than issues of class. Boggs sees the American New Left as more genuinely populist than the New Right, in the sense that its political campaigns more authentically reflect local and community concerns, rather than the interests of elites.10

**AMERICAN FILM AND POPULISM**

Garth Jowett calls his study of American cinema *The Democratic Art*, and certainly in the early years many films exhibited a sentimental affinity with the underdog, and even with the lower-middle-class man or woman lost in the crowd; Durganat and Simmon refer to the mix of individualistic Christianity and agrarian myth in the early features of King Vidor, as well as to the more general identification with the lower classes in the work of D.W.Griﬃth and Chaplin. In terms of the rural myth, and the communitarian dream represented by the untamed territories of the frontier, it is the case that American film has tended to favour
those who gain their living on the land, rather than in the city. From the city comes crime and corruption, and the ‘gangster’, while in the Western it is the settlers who—while rarely heroes—are depicted as carrying the values truest to the American dream.\textsuperscript{11} King Vidor’s \textit{Our Daily Bread} (1934) provides an example of the difficulty of classifying populist films of the thirties on a left—right spectrum. The film was criticised as left wing by the Hearst press, while \textit{New Theatre} felt that it had tendencies towards fascism. A rural co-operative is shown as a response to the Depression, but the principles of private property and leadership are endorsed. MGM in the 1930s consciously provided reassurance by affirming traditional values, but in \textit{The Good Earth} (1937), Irving Thalberg’s last film, the studio came close to populist values, placing Dust Bowl images in the safe context of a literary classic set in China. Wang (Paul Muni) is most sympathetic when he and his wife are poor, and live close to the earth; as a rich man he attracts sympathy only during the fight to defend the wheat against the plague of locusts, and after the death of his wife. Warner Bros was the studio both closest to the New Deal in the 1930s, and which also—with its proletarian stars—most identified with what Roddick calls the ‘model of the little man versus the world’ in its crime and social problem genres. However, with few exceptions—possibly \textit{Marked Woman}—this characteristic of the studio’s product implied no lasting social contradictions.\textsuperscript{12}

If populist cinema was one, belated reaction to the rise of industrial and urban America, another form that looked backward to the America of the late nineteenth century was the Western. The Western is often seen as part of the populist cultural tradition in America, favouring as it does the west over the east, and with its suspicion of large landowners, bankers and politicians. Some of the most successful Western films dramatise the conflict involved in the taming of the frontier, and the arrival from the east of ‘civilisation’—and its discontents. The late 1930s is sometimes seen as the classical period of the genre, before social issues, and a self-consciousness about the genre by filmmakers, destroyed its ‘innocence’. This notion can be debated, but this period has also been seen as the one in which John Ford produced his most populist work, including, in 1939, \textit{Stagecoach}, \textit{Young Mr Lincoln} and \textit{Drums Along the Mohawk} and, the next year, \textit{The Grapes of Wrath}.\textsuperscript{13}
John Ford’s vision was one of the Western and frontier values of family and community, and his films emphasise groups rather than individuals. Like Capra’s work, Ford’s films of the late 1930s were popular with the left, at a time when the left joined in the general affirmation of traditional American values. (In the 1930s Ford generally saw himself as a liberal or on the left.) It is in Stagecoach that Ford makes his first use of Monument Valley as a location, and against this setting—on the stagecoach journey to Lordsburg—a makeshift community of travellers is tried and tested. Ford—with his regular 1930s screenwriter, the liberal activist Dudley Nichols—favours the characters who are shunned by respectable society; it is the banker Gatewood who is throughout the least likeable character, while at the end of the film Doc Boone sends the prostitute Dallas (Claire Trevor) and the avenging outlaw the Ringo Kid (John Wayne) off on their own to an imagined rural paradise. They are, as Boone tells them, ‘freed from the blessings of civilisation’. At the beginning of Young Mr Lincoln we are introduced to the young Abraham Lincoln before the events which made him into a mythic figure. Lincoln is shown receiving authority, in the form of law books, directly from the poor people—from a pioneer family—and he later uses the law to defend them. (Steve Neale points to the way the film also reflects some of the contradictions inherent in populist ideology: ‘Lincoln, in incarnating the Law, is both of the “people” and above them’.) Ford’s last film to be released in 1939, Drums Along the Mohawk, can also be interpreted in terms of a conspiracy between producers and consumers to reaffirm traditional American values.14

After Darryl F. Zanuck had purchased the rights to The Grapes of Wrath, the studio and the financing bank—the Chase National in New York—came under heavy pressure not to go ahead.15 Joe Breen, in giving the judgement of the Production Code Administration, found the exposure of ‘shocking’ conditions to be balanced by ‘good images’ and, most important, by an ‘uplifting ending’, and this view—that the radical nature of the novel had been transformed in the film to something that was conservative—has also been offered by students of the film.16 The politicisation of Tom Joad is retained in the film, but alongside this, as a response to Depression hardship and exploitation, are placed two other motifs: the New Deal, as represented by the government camp which offers safe haven to the Joads, and an emphasis on the persistence of the family. The film ends not with Tom Joad’s
departure—establishing Henry Fonda’s liberal screen image—but with a scene in which the Joads are seen moving on again, and in which Ma Joad expresses the defiant, populist and ultimately conservative closing speech: ‘Rich fellows come up. They die. Their kids ain’t no good. They die out. But we keep a coming. We’re the people that live. Can’t lick us. We’ll go on for ever, ‘cause we’re the people.’ Yet, as with Capra’s films, critics and censors may at times have given too much weight to endings which, for audiences, do not, or did not, suppress and resolve the ‘problems’ raised earlier. Gallagher, for example, argues that ‘few films appear quite so seditious, bitter or daring’ as _The Grapes of Wrath_. Pare Lorentz criticised the film’s lack of a hard documentary sense of the ‘miserable huts and busted windmills’, but praised its faithful reproduction of ‘the bloody violence’ that accompanied economic upheaval.\(^{17}\)

The decline of the Western may reflect not only the erosion of the relevance of its images and concerns, and the lack of a sense of tradition among the young, but also the extent to which, once the code of the Western was abandoned, there was little left. As the most central of American myths, the Western story was essentially naive and optimistic—a story of strong and simple men doing what they had to do, and thereby contributing to the righting of wrongs. In 1954 Robert Warshow saw the Western form as an American ritual, seeing George Stevens, in his direction of _Shane_ (1953), as trying ‘to freeze the Western myth once and for all in the immobility of Alan Ladd’s countenance’. Increasingly the Western needed a greater social relevance to survive, and it travelled further and further from what some saw as its essentials. Will Wright has argued that the ‘Professional Plot’, which was increasingly associated with the Western of the 1960s and 1970s, reflected the inevitable intrusion of the contemporary world of monopoly capitalism into the world of the Western, finally destroying its code.\(^{18}\)

In the gangster and _film noir_ forms, both of which were to outlive the Western, images of the country play a small but significant role. They form a last, rural retreat for the criminal and misunderstood—in _High Sierra, You Only Live Once, Gun Crazy, The Prowler_ and _The Asphalt Jungle_. John Harvey has demonstrated how the narrative of _Out of the Past_ (1947) is based on a series of oppositions between the values of the country—the small town where Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) is discovered at
the beginning of the film—and those of the city, and of Bailey’s past. The values of the country are favoured, but they are no match for the power and energy of the forces that finally reach out for Bailey’s soul—and life. It is as if small town values needed to be affirmed, but at the cost of cutting them off from real life.

**PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION**

While at the time, and in recent years, the celebratory and sentimental aspects of Frank Capra’s work have been often invoked, a number of critics have drawn attention to pessimistic aspects of the director’s vision which, they argue, become more and more insistent in his middle-period films. Capra was born in Palermo and moved to Los Angeles in 1903, at the age of six. He began making films in 1921, and by 1934, when *It Happened One Night* scooped five Academy Awards, including best film and best direction, the director had played out the myth of the American dream, of upward mobility and success as a result of hard work. Reviewing the first forty years of his life in his autobiography, Capra remembers his own rededication to the task of making films about his adopted country and its people, as a way of saying ‘Thanks, America’. Columbia Pictures was a close community that Capra had joined in 1928, when it was a poverty-row studio. Buscombe has argued that the fact that Columbia had no major theatre acquisitions to finance, and that the financial control of the studio was held by a small group including Harry and Jack Cohn and the banker A.H.Giannini, bolstered its independence, and the anti-establishment nature of some of its film product.

Capra became a national celebrity in the later thirties, accepting further ‘Best Director’ Oscars for *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* in 1936 and *You Can’t Take It with You* in 1938. After Pearl Harbor Capra was made a colonel, and appointed to head the US War Department Documentary Film Unit, producing and at times directing a series of orientation and propaganda films to aid the war effort by explaining the causes of the war, the nature of the enemy and the values and beliefs for which America and its allies stood. After the war Capra returned to commercial film-making, at first in partnership with William Wyler and George Stevens in the independent production company Liberty Films. Yet none of the four feature films he made after the release of *State of the Union*, in 1948, until his retirement in the early sixties had
anything like the impact of his earlier films. Capra seemed to lose his feel for his audience, the cinema and American concerns.

To Richard Griffith, the first critic to analyse the social significance of Capra's work, the 'blend of realistic problem and imaginary solution' found in the films 'epitomised the dilemma of the middle-class mind in the New Deal period'. Griffith links Capra's cycle of films not only with popular writers associated with the *Saturday Evening Post* but with all those members of the middle class whose 'sense of property had not been destroyed by the depression', and who expressed 'inchoate opposition to the experiments of the administration'.

Jeffrey Richards identifies these middle-class values articulated in Capra's films as those associated with the populist strain in the American political tradition, a strain going back to the Declaration of Independence via the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements, with their theme of 'the defence of individualism against the forces of Organisation'. In the thirties, Richards argues, quoting Griffith, the middle class 'stood for the preservation of values already lost'. Richards identifies populist values as self-help, equality of opportunity for each individual, good neighbourliness and leadership by decent men opposed to large-scale government and business, and to intellectuals.²²

Given the new strength of corporate and government bureaucracy in the 1930s, such approaches associate Capra's work of the time, and in particular *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), with conservative opposition to the New Deal. Raymond Durgnat has seen Capra's position in this film as that of a moderate Republican, opposing what were seen as the federal excesses of the 'second New Deal'. Yet while Capra's work of the later 1930s may reflect the middle-class agenda of 'values already lost'—and Capra himself implied that he was a Republican voter—the films also seem to reflect elements of the broader and more progressive tradition of populism discussed earlier in this chapter.

There seems little evidence that Capra's films were any less popular with supporters of the New Deal, and it is at least possible that the consistent hostility to monopoly capital, and what Dickstein has seen as the 'recurring conspiracy of money and power against the common people', was significant in terms of what audiences 'constructed' from the various ideas on offer. The Roosevelt administration also used the language of the populist tradition, both in the rural iconography and practice of agencies
Plate 2: Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper) discovers the Depression in Mr Deeds Goes to Town (Columbia Pictures, 1936). Reproduced courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.
such as the Farm Security Administration and the Rural Electrification Administration, and in the general emphasis both on the notion of ‘the people’ (taken up by Henry Wallace in the war years), and on the popular mandate of the President (for example against the Supreme Court).  

The reviewer for New Masses said about Mr Deeds Goes to Town that ‘no other Hollywood film had an unemployed speak his mind with as much warmth and passion as does the farmer of this film’. Yet Deeds’s closing speech—cited by Ronald Reagan in his 1980 campaign as the definitive expression of the notion of voluntarism—perfectly reflects the hero’s rejection of the socialist goal of fundamental change. The film dramatises more starkly than in any other Capra film an opposition between the values of small town and city, and favours the morality of the country and the small town. Yet the city’s unstated virtue is excitement, both social and personal; Deeds pictures himself in Mandrake Falls talking to an imaginary girl, but in New York—the city of grand palaces without the noblemen—he has a real girl friend and comes to greater self-knowledge.

If Mr Deeds Goes to Town provides a strong case for the populist thesis with its sympathy for the masses and its advocacy of self-help, good neighbourliness and moral regeneration rather than structural change, then consideration of Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939) requires assessment of the complicating involvement of the left-wing writer Sidney Buchman. (Buchman was uniquely close to Harry Cohn at Columbia Pictures from 1934 until the early 1950s, when he was blacklisted, following his refusal to provide the House Committee with names; in his 1951 testimony he admitted membership of the Communist Party from 1938 to 1945.) Buchman provides a cynical portrayal of Congressional politics as the backdrop to Capra’s, and James Stewart’s, affirmative, and ultimately victorious, innocence and patriotic idealism. The analysis is more sophisticated, particularly concerning the power of media and business interests over politics in the Congress. In addition, the triumph of the small-town hero is in the later film only achieved by an unlikely plot device inside the last five minutes of the film.

Raymond Carney has produced what is by far the most detailed analysis of Capra’s film work, and his perspective involves the rejection of populist interpretations, and sees the films as implicitly critical of ‘all ideological and social structurings of experience’.
Instead Carney sees an internal vision of individualism as crucial to the understanding of the key films of Capra’s middle period (between 1936 and 1948); more than any particular social doctrine Carney sees the articulation of a personal attempt to resist the frustrations of social and institutional life and to defeat and overcome them by the public assertion of an internal vision. To Carney the content of this vision is less important than its existence. When Capra’s heroes no longer fight back against the dominant bureaucratic engagements and ideological discourses of the time, the films themselves lose their originality and appeal.

Carney rejects sociological explanations for the themes in Capra’s classic films; to him they are fictional explorations into the constraints that any society places on the individual imagination. The pessimistic vision of materialism in *It’s a Wonderful Life*—and implicitly in other films—is seen as less central to Capra’s art than the existential plight of the individual, trying to keep hold of a private vision while recognising society as it is. *It’s a Wonderful Life*—although it was not seen as such at the time—has the pessimism of Arthur Miller’s outlook of the same time, together with Capra’s own affirmative vision. It is difficult to see how this vision can be separated from its social implications, however, and from Capra’s perception of the constraints imposed on his hero by small-town capitalism on the one hand and his sense of social responsibility on the other.

It seems that there is less distance between sociological and transcendentalist interpretations than might be supposed. Carney sees Capra as an artist in the American romantic tradition—as well as in the Hollywood narrative tradition—who tells stories to express an internal imaginative vision, a vision which in part reflects the director’s own battle for self-realisation and self-expression in the Hollywood culture industry. To James D.Hart the most profound and comprehensive ideal of romanticism is ‘the vision of a greater personal freedom for the individual’. The two interpretations agree on much of the content of Capra’s central films: the emphasis, for example, in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington, Meet John Doe* and *State of the Union* on the overwhelming forces of centralised control and manipulation bearing down on the individual. Capra’s analysis—which Carney sees in terms of deconstruction—could equally well be described in the terminology of neo-Marxist theorists such as Marcuse or
Althusser. In *State of the Union* the public world of organisation and manipulation extends to the individual’s family and home.

Yet in terms of these films, and *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, Carney makes no sociological connection—as Richards does—between the content of the hero’s vision and social ideas and forces in American society. He seems either to deny the sociological meaning in films, or to downplay its importance compared to the meaning that relates to Capra’s place in an American romantic pantheon beginning with William James and Emerson. Nor does Carney ignore the problems of individual authorship of industrial products such as motion pictures of that time. He admits that others may contribute meanings—for example in discussing the radicalising effect on Capra’s work of the collaboration with Sidney Buchman in 1938. But Carney does not go far down this line of thinking, as it would lead him to notions of the social generation of meaning in feature films. He says nothing of the effect of box office, for example, and little of the constraints of studio production.²⁶

In part this difference of reading reflects the specialism of contemporary professional criticism. Richards writes as a social historian, Carney is a student of literary meanings. Carney admits the public as an essential realm in Capra’s films, but he sees it only as a foil to what really matters—the artist’s own imaginative vision. If one accepts Carney’s auteurial/ deconstructionist method, where does that leave other recurring themes in Capra’s key films: in particular the dominance of materialism, and the economic control of politics. These meanings were seen at the time, and this is why Capra’s films were so popular with the left. When is social meaning essentially background to an auteur’s vision (itself a combination of conscious, unconscious and myriad notions and meanings related to the inevitably collective and industrial construction/production of such film) and when does it constitute social meaning independently of that vision? Is capitalism in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, or politics in the other films under discussion, foreground or background?

The alternative tradition of interpretation does see Capra’s films as having political significance. Some see the key films as populist, and link this ideology to the concerns and values of a particular section of American society at the time—namely the lower middle classes. There are two questions here: first, do the films reflect populist ideology, and what was and is the nature and status of
this ideology in the United States at the time; and secondly, what function was played by the articulation of this ideology in popular film.

Richards’ work on Capra has been as influential as it has been in part because it fits into several broad perspectives; he sees a coherent political philosophy where Carney sees only a fictional context for Capra’s discussion of essentially existential problems of identity and expression. The perception of Capra as a populist director is convincing both to those who see an absence of class politics in America—so that particular strands of Jeffersonian democratic philosophy are invoked in order to criticise the actual practice of the American social system—and to those who see middle-class ideology as represented by the mass media, and who relate the meanings in Capra’s films to the broad interests of capital. (Another example of the latter form of interpretation would be the *Cahiers du Cinema* reading of John Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln.* )

The individual vision in Capra’s films is so often expressed in terms of a social and political context, and is so often seen to be inspired by key texts and symbols relating to particular political traditions in America, that it seems perverse not to embrace this aspect of their meaning. Whether this meaning is populist precisely, and whether it means much to label it as such, is another question. Capra’s heroes are indeed from small-town America, and in *Deeds* and *Smith* their solutions are certainly populist in spirit, although the boys’ camp plan in the later film seems more a plot device than an integral part of Smith’s vision. Another aspect of populist rhetoric, the critique of money power, is certainly reflected in the films, but this might in part reflect a wider set of attitudes of the time (including that of Popular Front groups), and, in addition, the analysis of money is a good deal more ideologically sophisticated—with its emphasis on the relationships between corporate, media and political power—than the traditional populist critique of moral conspiracy.

Capra’s key films do articulate a number of principles central to the democratic—rather than liberal—commitments of the early American polity. There is also the criticism of urban and corporate power, matching the perspective of Populists of the late nineteenth century. It is also true that these values were ‘already lost’ in the 1930s in the sense that the New Deal represented the beginning of big government, the recognition by government of the legitimacy
of corporate and labour power, and the consultation of intellectual opinion. Against these forces the poetry of Capra’s hero stands little chance, and in Mr Smith Goes to Washington Smith’s ‘lost cause’ is saved only by an unlikely denouement. Only in fantasy—in Lost Horizon—is Capra’s utopian vision, of a happy, co-operative community, made manifest.

If the two films of the 1930s combined personal/public vision and social critique within a variation of the ‘comedy of reconciliation’ form popular at the time, the films of the 1940s seem even less to privilege the co-operative vision over the dominant materialist forms and discourses. In Meet John Doe the analysis of economic power is really only balanced by the thoughts of a character already dead, and the emphasis, as in Mr Smith, is on the expropriation of public groups and institutions by unaccountable private interests. Radicals from Abraham Polonsky to Herbert Biberman recognise the social content in Capra’s films of the period from the mid 1930s to the late 1940s. Like Ford, Capra uses the Hollywood conventions and forms to suggest his own feelings about the individual in America; he accepts capitalism and materialism, but he shows how difficult these pervasive forces make it for the individual, privately and publicly. Carney sees the ending of It’s a Wonderful Life not in terms of the happy ending that has contributed to the film’s image as the epitome of Capra-corn but as an expression of George Bailey’s ‘moderate alienation’ from American small-town life. Capra pays homage to an American icon, but he is too honest to suggest that in practice it is any utopia.

MR DEEDS AND MR SMITH

In Mr Deeds Goes to Town financial elites use the law in an attempt to prevent Deeds giving his fortune to farmers who are willing to help themselves. In Mr Smith Goes to Washington, Smith introduces his own bill, and writer Sidney Buchman also supplies Claude Rains with a brief speech in which he defends the shoddy compromises of politics as sometimes necessary to the other, beneficial aspects of his work as a senator. Politics is most often portrayed as either manipulated or corrupt; the notion of the politician is viewed sceptically, reflecting the plebiscitary element of the populist outlook.
Mr Deeds Goes to Town (1936) was the first of the series of Capra films dealing with social issues. In what has been called 'the most stridently populist of nations', Capra's post-1936 films echoed, if not the concerns and politics of the Populists of the end of the nineteenth century, the more general populist features of American culture. The 1936 film raises the problem of unemployment, but this issue is not the subject of the film, nor is it integrated into the central opposition of the film's narrative, that between Longfellow Deeds, and the values he stands for, and the finance and culture of the city. There is no populist social movement in Mr Deeds, and if anything the final trial scene suggests the Hofstadter/Bell perspective of the illiberal tendencies exhibited by populist leaders and masses. Deeds's values are activated only when he encounters an unemployed farmer and is shocked into social responsibility. His response is to assert his right to practise good neighbourliness and encourage self-help by giving his fortune to several thousand unemployed farmers. In his speech to the sanity hearing—the speech quoted by Ronald Reagan in 1980—Deeds comes nearest to a coherent social statement; accepting that there will always be inequality in society, he argues that those who are more successful should help those who are struggling—as long as the latter are genuinely trying to improve themselves. Deeds in no sense responds to collective action by farmers, only to the one farmer who is driven by his circumstances to threaten him with a gun; only when Deeds decides that the farmer is not a 'moocher' does he decide to help him, and those like him.

There is no pretence that Deeds' action 'solves' the Depression. While the private nature of Deeds' decision, together with Cedar's reference to the effects on the 'governmental system', have been interpreted as representing a moderate Republican, anti-New Deal position, this seems to put too much emphasis on what is really part of the film's plot mechanism rather than a central element of its meaning. The film in no sense endorses the Hoover principle that the acceptance of Federal money by the unemployed undermines their self-respect. Opinion on the Works Progress Administration, which came into being in 1935, and which was also designed to help the unemployed by giving them work, was at the time divided, but it seems easier to read the film as broadly sympathetic to—and in some sense a metaphor for—the humanitarian ideals of Roosevelt's policies than as making a critical point about the 'second New Deal'. Certainly the
communist press did not interpret the film as critical of the New Deal; the Daily Worker, for example, praised the film.\(^{31}\) (The contemporary schemes—admittedly federal—to provide low interest loans to farmers’ cooperatives for the purpose of building power lines, seem in general harmony with the Deeds plan.) In addition, had Capra intended to make a critical point about current administration policy, it is difficult to believe that he would have allowed Deeds’ New York mansion, from where he dispenses his fortune, to resemble so closely the architectural layout of the White House.

In terms of American political tradition and what has been called its ‘ideological project’, it is Deeds’ pilgrimage to see Grant’s tomb that is most central.\(^{32}\) Here Deeds tells Saunders that only in ‘a country like America’ could a small Ohio farm boy become a great soldier, and then president. Gary Cooper perfectly expresses the mixture of innocence and rugged individualism that Deeds brings to the world of the city. Quoting Thoreau, he remarks that New York has grand palaces without the noblemen to put in them. Capra’s film in no sense challenges capitalism, but endorses a humane, and human, practice of it; Saunders and Deeds discover the similarity of their small-town roots, and the Deeds spell works on Saunders’ opportunism and cynicism, while undermining her independence. Capra votes for a ‘kinder and gentler America’—at least for those who are deserving—while endorsing both the economic system and the political tradition.

Many of the elements of Mr Deeds are repeated in Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939), but the latter film uses its explicitly political locale to explore much further into the nature of power. James Stewart is another innocent, although he is a less convincing man of the west than Gary Cooper, and seems too diffident to put out forest fires single-handed. Innocence is suggested not only by the hero’s idealist vision of American political values, but also by the role played by children in the film. Through montages the key relationships that make up the power structure are sketched, and although this structure is of power at the state level, the spectator is often reminded of the fact that Paine—and more crucially Taylor—have their eyes on the White House. From the beginning ‘Youth Leader’ Smith is viewed as a man of nature (an expert on wild game and animals) and as a patriot who can recite from Lincoln, Washington and Jefferson, but it is on the train journey to the capital that the nature of the film’s hero is revealed. (The scene
was apparently written by Capra himself.) Smith’s father was a ‘champion of lost causes’ who—as a publisher and editor of an independent newspaper—took on a mining syndicate on behalf of ‘one small miner who stuck to his claim’. Had this film been made at Warners, Clayton Smith’s death—shot in the back because he stood up to the syndicate—would have left its marks on his son. But, defying psychological truth, Jefferson Smith is—at this stage of the film—totally without bitterness, and he brings to Washington both a naivety and a shining vision of the American constitution. Into his bill he tries to put the ‘Capitol dome’, and the fight is on between reality and the individual’s own vision and resources.

Sidney Buchman’s contribution to the film has already been mentioned. In the later Talk of the Town (Columbia, 1942) the story also concerns the nature of American democracy. Professor Lightcap specialises in the principles of law but needs to be humanised—and not only by the ubiquitous Jean Arthur. Only when Lightcap recognises his own social obligations—acting outside the law to rectify an injustice done to his friend—is he fit to take his place on the Supreme Court bench.

Reflecting in part Buchman’s concerns, Mr Smith Goes to Washington is more explicitly about American society than Mr Deeds. While the later film is more sentimental, with its smiling page boys, and with Jean Arthur’s conversion less convincing and motivated than before, it reflects Capra’s passion more powerfully through Stewart’s performance. Further, and in part because of Buchman’s involvement, the mechanisms of power are given greater detail and weight. There is even a defence of compromise and of its importance to the politician’s art. When Smith discovers that his hero, Senator Paine, the fighter for lost causes alongside his father, has been taking Taylor’s advice on how to vote for twenty years, he goes to see him in his Senate office. Paine tells him that he has been living in a boy’s world, and that he ought to stay there; ‘This is a man’s world, Jeff, and you’ve got to check your ideals outside the door like you do your rubbers.’ Paine defends his years of compromise—‘so that all those years I could sit in that Senate and serve the people in a thousand honest ways’. He defends his work in helping his state secure the lowest unemployment and the highest federal grants: ‘...but, well I’ve had to compromise, I’ve had to play ball. You can’t count on people voting—half the time they don’t vote anyway. That’s how states and empires have been built since time began, don’t you understand.’
Paine’s dialogue is interesting because it cuts across the main drive of the film, the belief that the ‘innocent’ ideals of American democracy must and can be applied to the adult and real world of American politics. The realist discourse seems to triumph when Smith is accused of corruption and is discredited, even in the eyes of children. He makes one final, despairing visit to the Lincoln Memorial before intending to return to his boy’s world, ‘away from the words, and the monuments and the whole rotten show’, but Saunders convinces him to make a final rally for his beliefs. She tells Smith, referring to Lincoln’s example, that ‘all the good that ever came into this world came from fools with faith like that’. Appealing to his faith in ‘plain, decent, everyday common rightness’, she inspires Smith to his final effort, his filibuster speech.

Lincoln is invoked as a sacred presence to inspire Smith’s passionate last effort, but the forces of reality are still strong, and, as has been pointed out, Smith is again reduced to despair, to denying his beliefs, before Paine’s last-minute volte-face gives the film its ‘happy ending’. The film portrays a dialectic between American ideals and reality in which, for the hero, echoing the British amateur sporting ethic, it is the ‘taking part’ that is most important. Capra’s vision cannot be divorced from his experience of and concern for the public realm. Capra’s idealism—his affirmation of what he sees as the rational, or at least the ideal, over the ‘real’—is as political as that of Herbert Marcuse, who made the same distinction central to his own work in the 1960s. (Marcuse, in his critique of American society in the mid-1960s, argued that the ‘assimilation of the ideal with reality testifies to the extent to which the ideal has been surpassed’.) The distinction between ideas and reality in American politics also recurs in the ‘Why We Fight’ series of films that Capra supervised and often directed during the war years for the US Government. In War Comes to America (1945), for which Capra claims to have written the script, the commentary talks of Americans fighting both for a country and for an idea: ‘The idea bigger than the country—without the idea the country might have remained only a wilderness, without the country the idea might have remained only a dream.’ In the wartime propaganda film no contradiction is intended between idea and country; in Mr Smith Goes to Washington the gap between ideal and performance is the crux of the film.
Social meaning was quickly thrust upon the film after its high-profile first showing for senators; while Washington insiders were hostile, critics and moguls defended the film, which a recent writer has seen as part of Hollywood’s contribution to the ‘renewal of national political sentiment’ at the time. In *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* Capra moved from the rather flat villains of the earlier film to a greater analysis of the penetration of political by economic power. The ideals of American democracy are associated with that icon of thirties documentary literature and culture, the common man and woman, but the narrative revolves around a particular representative of ‘the people’, the middle-class man as an innocent abroad. While agrarian and small-town values are preferred to those of the metropolis, and the emphasis is on morality rather than ideology, neither film allows a contemplation of collective action for change or permits within the narrative of the film any challenge to the key economic structure.

**CAPRA AND THE FORTIES**

In the later films the personal vision disappears or is watered down, and the individual vision is incorporated into the normal politics of corporate America. While Capra gives us his personal vision in *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), in *Meet John Doe* (1941) and *State of the Union* (1948) there is not even a rhetorical victory for the values of good neighbourliness. In the 1941 film there is no individual vision—other than a final refusal to be used—while in Capra’s last major film the worlds of vision and of power are separated. Capra’s films exhibit a belief in the manipulative power of the mass media that the new post-war students of the media and politics were beginning, in what was to be the conventional wisdom for twenty years, to deny. Just after being asked to make the wartime ‘Why We Fight’ series of films, Capra had been shown *Triumph of the Will*, and he later recorded that the film was ‘lethal’ as a propaganda weapon.

Capra began the 1940s aware of his reputation for Capracorn, and this image may have distracted audiences from the cutting edges of his 1930s films. The sentiment, the screwball romance and Capra’s speciality, the reaction shots of authority figures, all help to reassure audiences that happy endings are in sight. For their next project Capra and Robert Riskin established an independent company, and they attempted a harder, more realistic product that
would convince critics as well as audiences. The film, *Meet John Doe* (1941), originally announced as ‘The Life and Death of John Doe’, was made on the Warner Bros lot, but was substantially financed by a Bank of America advance to Frank Capra Productions.\(^{37}\)

In Capra’s films of the 1940s his heroes are undefeated, but hardly victorious. *Meet John Doe* deals with the making of American myths and, as Carney suggests, it prefigures the age of the media event. Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper), the hobo hired by tycoon and mass communications baron D.B.Norton (Edward Arnold, expanding his role in *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*), is a passive symbol of a movement of social clubs on which Norton intends to base his authoritarian political ambitions. When Willoughby realises his role as a stooge in the Norton operation he tries to speak up, but, at a political convention designed to launch a John Doe party, he is prevented from doing so by strong-arm tactics. Capra testified to disliking crowds, and his treatment of the convention indicates his fears that the masses could easily be swayed. Capra and Riskin at no point agreed on an ending to the film, and several endings were filmed. In one of the endings that was filmed but not used Willoughby does commit suicide, in line with the working title of the project; to Capra it was a powerful ending, but ‘you just can’t kill Gary Cooper’\(^{38}\) In the ending that was finally selected the despairing Willoughby/Doe, threatening to deliver on his promise to commit suicide on Christmas Day by throwing himself from the top of City Hall, is persuaded not to do so by a group of members of John Doe clubs who suggest that the movement can have a new life, separate from Norton.

*Meet John Doe* was Capra and Riskin’s distinctive contribution to the pre-war cycle of films relating to the international threat of fascism. It was influenced by what Capra saw as the emergence of little ‘Führers’ in America.\(^{39}\) Yet the film drew on elements of the Capra formula. Norton is not only a nascent fascist, but the basis of his economic and ideological power is made clear. (There is no humanisation of the Edward Arnold character, as occurs in *You Can’t Take It with You.*) The John Doe clubs offer good neighbourliness, and a private employment service that takes people off relief, but they are all based on a lie—that John Doe is a real person. The small town is no longer insulated from mass culture as it seemed to be in *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*, something
that in real life owed much to the national impact of the cinema itself. Denied a leader at the convention the people seem to turn into a mob. Willoughby is a cipher who never finds an authentic vision, and cannot even commit suicide because Norton’s men will, in the tradition of totalitarian leaders of the era, cover up the tracks. The Capra protagonist does find a dignity and independence, a realisation of the implications of his passive and self-interested performance, but the indication at the end of the film that the people are similarly made aware carries little weight. The last words of the film, ‘There you are, Norton. The people. Try and lick that’, do not really put to rest the doubts raised by the film. The problem, however, concerns the extent to which Capra and Riskin are complicit in the phenomenon they describe, and warn Americans about. There seems to be no role for an authentic politics in the film, apart from the moralistic ‘John Doe’ clubs, which seem so dependent on their leader that they are hardly distinguishable from the threatening totalitarianism of the Norton junta.

To Andrew Sarris _Meet John Doe_ showed Frank Capra crossing the line between ‘populist sentimentality’ and ‘populist demagoguery’, while Richard Corliss identified Robert Riskin with ‘populist demagoguery’, and Sidney Buchman with ‘democratic republicanism’. Riskin had been one of the primary founders of Screen Playwrights, the organisation formed in 1936 to oppose the Screen Writers Guild; in his writing his conception of politics seems limited. In _Mr Deeds_ there is no politics beyond the implicit threat that the assembled farmers represent at the sanity hearing. Herbert Biberman, reviewing _Meet John Doe_ for _New Masses_ at the time, criticised Capra for the tendency that he detected in the film—and to some extent in _You Can’t Take It with You_—for politics to be seen as of no use and for ‘unpolitical organised neighbourliness’ to take over.\(^40\) Certainly, as already discussed, the most sophisticated treatment of politics appears in _Mr Smith Goes to Washington_, and it is in this film that the grass-roots support for Capra’s protagonist is demonstrated, inadequate as it is to defeat the power of the machine. In _Magic Town_ (1947), which Riskin wrote and produced, there is again little sense of local politics as something independent of the manipulations of a ‘leader’ from out of town.

In _Meet John Doe_ and _State of the Union_ the individual victory is muted or non-existent. In _It’s a Wonderful Life_, Capra’s first
Liberty production, the director examines a small town from which a ‘hero’ never departs. Instead of inheriting a fortune or taking on a political office, the protagonist lives a life of constraint and frustration. George Bailey’s life is powerfully affirmed as ‘wonderful’ in a seven-minute happy ending to end all happy endings, but what has gone before indicates a life that has fallen far short of Bailey’s greatest and best hopes. As Robert Sklar points out, the life of George Bailey was really only ‘wonderful’ in contrast to the double hell—revealed to us by the angel Clarence—of Bedford Falls as it would have been had Bailey not been born. The ‘happy ending’ strengthened the stereotype of Capra as an archetypal old Hollywood director, dispenser of dreams, but the darker vision is surely there for all to see. As Ray argues, it was the glimpse of the ‘utter emptiness of American life that remained despite the film’s happy ending’. For this or other reasons the returns at the box office were disappointing.

Packed with contemporary references, and adapted by Anthony Veiller and Myles Connelly from a play, State of the Union (1948), was Capra’s second and final film for Liberty. Again, Capra’s hero is manipulated, and he finally chooses defeat rather than be complicit in the ‘new politics’ and the fabrication of his image. When the doctoring of his real personality also spreads to his home, he draws the line. That businessman Grant Matthews (Spencer Tracy) has a vision seems more significant than the nature of that vision—an amalgam of traditional Capra motifs, a distrust of the key intermediate institutions of business and labour, and some internationalist ideas. The last of Capra’s important films, it is consistent with the rest of the films of his central period in its picture of ideological controls on the individual.

To Capra State of the Union was ‘my last Frank Capra film, my last burst of autumn colours before the winter of artistic slavery to the major studio hierarchy at Paramount Pictures’. Capra’s two post-war films perhaps mark the end of the great hopes and dreams of the 1930s. What is left at the end of both films looks suspiciously like defeat, and resignation. Capra also reported a campaign of innuendo against his political affiliations which began while he was making State of the Union. (The film starred Katharine Hepburn and Adolphe Menjou; in the year the film was made Hepburn had spoken to a rally on behalf of Henry Wallace, while Menjou had been one of the most conservative of the friendly witnesses to testify to the House Committee on Un-
American Activities.) The innuendo led in 1951 to Capra being vetoed for a Defense Department assignment, and to John Ford writing to the department on his behalf.42

In retrospect there seemed to be little scope in Capra’s formula for further development, although the political accusations, which took two years to dismiss, and the feeling that the ending of Liberty represented a failure of courage, hardly encouraged him to try to seek new public metaphors for his feelings about the individual and society. In the light of the House investigation and the blacklist, the studios were likely to look suspiciously at ideas that could be construed as critical of existing institutions and ‘normal politics’, whether they were intended as such or not.

Capra’s path continued to cross with those of liberal and left writers. At RKO Dalton Trumbo and Clifford Odets had worked on the script for what would become It’s a Wonderful Life, before Liberty purchased the original story, and the scripts, in September 1945. Only a small section of the Odets script survived in the final script, on which Michael Wilson also claimed to have worked. The final credits for the script were given to the liberal Jo Swerling, to Capra himself, and to the team of Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. Late in the 1950s Harry Cohn contemplated Capra as a director for Clifford Odets’ major, doomed project, Joseph and His Brethren.43

One of the objectives of the House Committee was to associate the popular culture of the Popular Front, and of anti-fascism, with the apparent threat of communism. In early 1948 William Wyler commented that a film such as The Grapes of Wrath could no longer be made, and a writer talked of the difficulty of making Westerns given that staple elements of their plots, including foreclosing bankers, were no longer acceptable. Capra’s analysis of corrupt elites, however disguised by happy endings, seemed less welcome in the emerging age of the military industrial complex. Warners lost faith in the common man, while some left writers such as Albert Maltz, whose contributions to Mildred Pierce (largely unused in the completed film) and The Naked City had a broadly populist slant, became victims of the blacklist. The breakup of the Popular Front and the emergence of anti-communism as the central issue of the times, further discouraged such motifs. Affirming the system by criticising it was a strategy that was increasingly favoured by post-war circumstances. To Ceplair and Englund the films of the 1950s displayed little of the
‘populist spirit’ that had been evident in ‘the most notable thirties and forties films’.

By the 1950s the notion of the regeneration of corrupt elites by the spirit of the people was seen by ‘vital center’ liberals as dangerous to the fabric of liberal democracy. Such liberals were instead to put their faith in the value of elites, and in the checking of popular passion by the proximate concerns of multiple group involvement. (Capra’s *Meet John Doe* seems, unconsciously on the director’s part, to dramatise the assumed danger of a politics without strong intermediate institutions, including parties and pressure groups.) Capra’s formula was one that was suspicious of elites, and of the ‘normal politics’ of parties and pressure groups; by the 1950s these were seen as central to the American system. (Did not a politics of morality and passion threaten to sweep up the masses in a movement that might endanger institutions which guaranteed American liberties?) While the ‘visions’ in Capra’s films contain right- and left-wing elements, and the contradictions inherent in populism, his work was often seen as part of the Popular Front consensus of the late 1930s, and of the war years. By 1950 it was Joseph McCarthy who used a form of populist rhetoric as part of his anti-communist campaign. The ideological context of Capra’s formula had been passed by.

To Carney the ‘crisis that effectively concludes Capra’s career is that he becomes unable to maintain his earlier belief in the expressive power of the individual’.

Yet Carney’s detailed explorations into the structures’ of Capra’s films seem compatible with, and even demand, a more social interpretation. This chapter has suggested the linking of Capra’s work not only to a broad and contradictory populist tradition, but also to the dominant political currents of the time. The post-war decline of ‘populist’ cinema seems to provide some evidence of its political and ‘public’ significance. Capra’s individualism was surely always related to social responsibilities, and the recurring vision of his middle-period films seems concerned with the social constraints on what Odets saw as the ‘human possibilities’.