

National FWP officials developed programs that they thought would make a significant contribution to American culture. Their programs were formulated in the context of national depression, New Deal recovery programs, and the growing crisis in international relations. They also addressed inherited questions about the nature of American identity, nationality, and culture. Their answers reflected their cultural nationalism, cultural pluralism, and cosmopolitanism. In both idealistic and practical terms national FWP officials contemplated the relationships between government and culture and, ultimately, between culture and democracy. The answers they offered to the questions they inherited were shaped by their relationship to the romantic nationalist tradition, the pluralist and cosmopolitan attitudes they had developed out of their personal experience and pre-FWP careers, and the decision that state guidebooks would in the beginning provide a vehicle that would allow the FWP both to fulfill its relief functions and to address key questions about American culture. Like all cultural nationalists they assumed that answers to the question of national identity and the achievement of national unity were intimately tied to the development of the arts. The FWP was a manifestation of cultural nationalism in a period of crisis.²

That nationality is an essential part of personal identity is an idea so pervasive in the modern world that the relationship between the two is taken for granted and few are conscious of the history of the efforts in different nation-states to create this link. Cultural nationalism has been a significant component of modern nation building and a widespread response to the growing social-structural differentiation of modern societies, which, in theory, has led to segmentation and a transition from face-to-face to impersonal relations. Examining the history of cultural nationalism in Germany from the Napoleonic wars to the triumph of Nazism, George L. Mosse found that in response to "the atomization of traditional views and the destruction of traditional and personal bonds," myths developed that "were meant to make the world whole again and to restore a sense of community to a fragmented nation." Cultural nationalism in Germany and elsewhere has often been exclusive, reactionary, illiberal, and racist. The pluralist version of cultural nationalism, however, turns diversity into a virtue and celebrates it as a source of national vitality. The creation of an atmosphere in which cultural pluralism could develop was a triumph of New Deal nationalism. The FWP both reflected and contributed to this atmosphere.³

Not only were American intellectuals in the 1930s trying to rediscover America, as so many commentators then and since have pointed out; they were also trying to redefine it. The studies published by the Writers' Project tried to

broaden the definition of who and what was American. To answer such questions the FWP offered new materials: ex-slave narratives, folklore and folk song, and the life histories of ordinary people. In the American Guide Series, which included guidebooks to every state in the union and to numerous cities, counties, and geographic areas, the FWP tried to provide the nation with a "road map for the cultural rediscovery of America."⁴

FWP officials were hardly the first Americans to address questions about tradition, unity, and the arts in America. Laments about the lack of a unifying national tradition in the United States are as old as the republic. Henry James's oft-cited complaints about American culture are representative. Examining American life, James was struck by "the coldness, the thinness, the blankness," as contrasted to what he thought was "the denser, richer, warmer European spectacle." James focused on the lack of traditional national institutions and classes: "no sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy," and on the lack of a built environment that symbolized a traditional sense of place: "no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins." Constant uncertainty about whether American life provided a basis for creating an American art has been accompanied by frequent declarations of cultural independence and maturity, such as Emerson's "American Scholar" and Van Wyck Brooks's *America's Coming of Age*. The FWP offered yet another such declaration.⁵

Central aspects of the FWP response to the need for a unifying tradition become clearer when this need is viewed as an enduring American problem. The Depression and the international crisis intensified anxiety about the role of tradition in American life and the search for unity. Democratic results, as totalitarian developments abroad illustrated, were not foreordained. The New Deal drew on and broadened native liberal traditions. FWP officials assumed that knowledge of the experience of ordinary Americans, a celebration of the nation's cultural pluralism, and a cosmopolitan attitude toward the country's diversity would fulfill the functions of a unifying tradition.

"Problems of social cohesion," of "the struggle between rival ways of getting together," have, according to historian John Higham, "been a central theme" in American history. His point "is not the uniqueness of the American experience, but rather the special salience here of disparities every modernizing society seems to confront." Primordial ties, a feeling of unity based on inherited relationships, have played a limited integrative role in the United States. Instead ideological definitions have been offered as a basis for American identity, purpose, and unity. Like ideology, technical unity—bureaucratic, rational, and effi-