

# Teaching Democracy: Folkways Records and Cold War Education

*Rachel C. Donaldson*

## Introduction

By the waning years of the 1940s America had lost much of what remained of its postwar optimism as fears of Communism came to dominate the national political conversation. Left-leaning citizens had particular cause for disillusionment as politicians continued to trample many vestiges of New Deal programs and ideals in their rightward trek. The passage of the antilabor Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 and Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace's abysmal failure at the polls in the 1948 election hammered more nails into the coffin of leftwing activism. What ultimately caused the Old Left to retreat from mainstream political discourse was, of course, the new ideological war that loomed on the horizon. While U.S. foreign policy focused on containing Communism abroad, local and federal government agencies and civilian vigilante groups rallied to fight suspected communists at home. Government agencies and private organizations compiled lists of alleged subversives, such as *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* that the right-wing publication *Counterattack* released in 1950. The attacks on those in the media and government were well documented, as news sources reported the trials of iconic groups like the Hollywood Ten and televised the Army-McCarthy hearings. At the same time that anticommunists focused on rooting out subversives in the State Department, organized labor, and the entertainment industry, they also turned their attention to education. Many political leaders, both liberal and conservative, viewed education as the "key factor" in securing American victory in the Cold War; as a result, between the end of WWII and the 1960s, anticommunists devoted an unprecedented amount of scrutiny to public schools, administrators, and teachers.<sup>1</sup>

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Rachel C. Donaldson is a historian and historical preservationist. This article is adopted from her recent book, *"I Hear America Singing": Folk Music and National Identity* (Temple University Press, 2014). She is also co-author (with Ronald D. Cohen) of *Roots of the Revival: American & British Folk Music in the 1950s* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>1</sup>Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2, 6.

As American culture and society grew increasingly conservative from the late 1940s through the 1950s, American schools followed suit. Through fear and intimidation, anticommunist crusaders in the government and in private organizations worked to oust leftwing sympathizers and remove politically progressive curricula from public schools. Mainstream concepts of American identity during the early Cold War era entailed a denunciation of ideals that bore any traces of collectivism, socialism, or communism. Although constructs of American identity commonly eschewed these traces throughout the first half of the century, Americanism in the 1950s took on a notably new quality. Now, rather than a passive disavowal of communism, one had to take an active stance; to be an American during the Cold War required one to *fight against* communism. Taking up the mantle of this battle—becoming an anticommunist—was how citizens proved their loyalty to the American way of life. This was the lesson that children learned in both popular culture and in their schoolrooms. Throughout the early Cold War years, civics, social studies, and history curricula became lessons in uncritical patriotism in which the virtues of American free enterprise were juxtaposed to the evils of Soviet Communism.<sup>2</sup> By imparting such a message to students, schools became, according to historian Andrew Hartman, a major contributor not only to the conservative climate of the 1950s, but also to the “construction of ‘cold warriors’ conditioned to fear and loathe communism” and leftwing ideals. Although recent scholarship has challenged the view that consensus and conformity dominated the American political landscape, there was one thing that conservatives and liberals mutually agreed upon: getting leftists and their political ideals out of the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Stuart Foster, *Red Alert: Educators Confront the Red Scare in Public Schools, 1947-1954* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 9; Julia Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 223.

<sup>3</sup>Hartman, *Education and the Cold War*, 5-6. In the past three decades, historians have increasingly challenged the idea that the 1950s were characterized by complete political consensus and social conformity. For further information on this subject, please see Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989); John McMillian and Paul Buhle, eds., *The New Left Revisited* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003); William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Cornelis A. van Minnen and Jaap van der Bent, Mel van Elteren, eds., *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999). These works engage with issues pertaining to American society as a whole. The corpus of literature examining the nuances of political

In the midst of this political repression, however, some who remained committed to progressive Americanism did manage to find safe harbors from the storm of McCarthyism. Ironically, several of these outlets pertained to children's culture. For example, according to historian Julia Mickenberg, many radical writers found niches in the world of children's literature during the fifties and early sixties. Mickenberg further argues that the "hidden history" of children's books of this era helps to explain how the rise of political activism in the 1960s followed on the heels of the sedate fifties. These authors ultimately sought to help children to become "autonomous, critical thinkers who questioned authority and believed in social justice." Even seemingly apolitical books contained progressive messages such as world peace, civil rights, proto-feminism, and anti-McCarthyism.<sup>4</sup> By sustaining progressive democratic ideals through the red scare, ideals that were foundational for the upsurge of political activism during the early 1960s, these writers provided an ideological link between the Old and New Lefts.

These writers were not alone. Several musicians, writers, public folklorists, and musical entrepreneurs tried to spread a similar message through music, specifically folk music, and found a receptive audience in progressive schools and children's summer camps. Like many of the leftwing children's book authors, these figures had their political awakening during the Popular Front, a movement that officially lasted from 1935 to 1939 and was revived in the United States during World War II and the immediate postwar years. While the Popular Front began with a Soviet dictate, Michael Denning argues that historians need to look beyond Party politics to adequately understand this period of leftist activity. Rather than viewing it through the lens of institutional Communism, Denning regards the Popular Front as a broad-based social movement wrought by the CIO organizing drives, international antifascist efforts, and left-leaning New Dealers. The Popular Front coalition consisted of "industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré antifascists" united by a shared interest in "laborist social democracy, antifascism, and antilynching" efforts. Taking up the oft-cited mantle of "the people," Popular Front activists worked to generate alliances across racial and ethnic lines that balanced dominant Anglo-American culture, African-American culture, and ethnic working-class culture. In his assessment of the termination and lasting legacy of the culture of the Popular Front, Denning describes all leftists—from Party stalwarts to fellow travelers—as "repressed and expelled from public culture" by

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protest in the 1950s, particularly that of the civil rights movement, is too large to list here.

<sup>4</sup>Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 6–7, 11.

the end of the 1940s. What had been an eclectic political movement had become “a beleaguered subculture” that adopted such icons as the folk quartet The Weavers and Paul Robeson, both of whom fell victim to the red scare. Yet, throughout the fifties, certain ideals that had come to the fore during the Popular Front era managed to seep into American culture, manifested as a lingering cultural awareness. Although the movement leaders had been largely silenced, the *spirit* of the movement continued aesthetically through cultural products such as novels and films.<sup>5</sup>

Leftwing members of the folk music scene were well situated within this movement and, like the authors of children’s literature, they continued to promote the prodemocracy and prodiversity message that had come to the fore during the Front into the Cold War era—a message that they geared to school children. One such figure was Moses Asch, the founder of, and force behind, Folkways Records. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Asch released musical and spoken-word albums that he tailored to the educational market, specifically for topics in history and social studies. In doing so, he too served as a conduit of socially progressive politics during the so-called era of consensus and conformity, educating the children who would become the activists of the New Left and the participants in the folk music revival of the early 1960s. Examining the ways in which he operated during the fifties and early sixties, and understanding how he managed to escape political censure, helps to shed new light on the political and educational climate of America during the early Cold War era.

### Moses Asch and Folkways Records

Born into a literary Eastern European Jewish family, Asch was the son of one of the most renowned Yiddish authors of the twentieth century, Sholem Asch. In 1914 Moses Asch came to the United States to escape war in Europe. During the mid-1920s he returned to study radio engineering in Germany. After moving back to the United States, he opened a radio repair business and continued to work in sound engineering and radio throughout the 1930s. In 1940 he began his first record label, Asch, which focused on producing Jewish music. Asch expanded his repertoire with his second record company, Disc, through which he released albums of Jewish folk music, jazz, and educational material. After an ill-fated venture with a Nat King Cole Christmas album that missed the holiday season, Asch landed in dire financial

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<sup>5</sup>Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 4, 9, 464.

straits and had to declare bankruptcy. However, with the help of his assistant, Marion Distler, he got back on his feet and formed Folkways Records in 1948.<sup>6</sup>

Moses Asch's social and political views significantly influenced his work in the music industry. Despite his persistent claims that he was not a political activist, Asch came from a political family; one of his closest relatives was an aunt, Basha, who was a Communist revolutionary and served as an educational consultant under Lenin. In addition to his lineage, Asch had several childhood experiences that permanently shaped his worldview. When traveling to the United States to reunite with his parents during World War I, Asch had crossed paths with injured soldiers returning from the front. As he told interviewer Tony Schwartz, seeing the mangled bodies was his "first experience of what man does to man," and it left a lasting impression. Upon reaching America, Asch was detained at Ellis Island because his father had misspelled his name and stated his birthday incorrectly on official forms. Again, he recounted to Schwartz that this experience affected him deeply: "And so, the rest of my family went, [and] there I was a kid [alone]. I saw what was happening and I saw these immigrants like myself. They were shut off." In another interview, Asch stated that this experience made him recognize "the need of the people to express themselves some way against this injustice." As Asch recalled, both of these events forever shaped his commitment to helping the socially, economically, and politically dispossessed to speak out against their conditions.<sup>7</sup>

The Depression years had a profound impact on Moses Asch's social views and he, like many other political progressives, became acutely interested in the plight of the "common man." According to his son, Michael, Asch was aligned with left-leaning New Deal Democrats and Popular Front leftists who were among a coterie of political activists—"democrats, socialists, communists, and anarchists"—who believed that they must work to generate a society that would eliminate political, social, and economic inequality. This ideology lay behind the founding of Folkways Records: to fight against fascism, racism, and economic exploitation and create a world of "peace, brotherhood, and equality." Michael Asch maintains that Folkways was his father's response to the times: a place where social equality could thrive, "if not in real life, then

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<sup>6</sup>Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 40. Though Asch ran the company, Distler had the title of president to avoid legal complications from his recent financial disaster.

<sup>7</sup>Moe Asch Interview with Tony Schwartz, part 2 (undated), CDR-518-1, transcript 1, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; David K. Dunaway Interview with Moses Asch, 8 May 1977, 2, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

at least, symbolically.”<sup>8</sup> Moses Asch’s social views reflected the leftwing version of Americanism prominent during the Popular Front era, which embraced cultural pluralism, the democratic ideal, and working-class populism, and this outlook shaped much of his work in the recording industry.

Asch regarded his record companies as a medium for the higher mission of documenting critical aspects of the people’s culture. This conviction led him to enter the educational market during the Disc Records era. According to his biographer, Peter Goldsmith, the mid-1940s marked the beginning of Asch’s two most notable tendencies: recording socially progressive music and attempting to fill holes in the recording market. These two traits worked in tandem; rather than simply recording music to fit different market niches, Asch consistently recorded music that he believed was culturally or politically significant. For example, during the mid-1940s, Asch distributed flyers for Lead Belly recordings that claimed, “they are of undoubted educational, cultural, and entertainment value not only to the whole Negro race, but to every American as well.”<sup>9</sup> Listening to these recordings would therefore help inspire pride among African-American children while at the same time educating children of other races and ethnicities about how American identity rested on a foundation of cultural and political democracy.

In 1949 the newly formed Folkways released its first educational record, *Who Built America: American History Through Its Folksongs*, performed by Bill Bonyun. In the liner notes, educational consultant Beatrice Landeck described the songs as “the spontaneous expression” of the early immigrants and pioneers “whose experiences are the substance of history.” She explained that the album was particularly suitable for young children because “[t]he simple words, without scholarly pretension and full of laughter, reveal the deeper meaning of history as no written record can possibly reveal it.” Songs like “Green Mountain Boys,” “Erie Canal,” “Auction Block,” “Jesse James,” “Mi Chicara,” “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh,” and the Navajo song “Happiness” did indeed span American history and included both traditional and relatively contemporary folk songs.<sup>10</sup> The album adhered to the concept of cultural pluralism by including Hispanic, American-Indian, and African-American songs and grouping them together under the

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<sup>8</sup>Michael Asch, “Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting: Some Personal Reflections,” *Canadian Folk Music* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 3, 5.

<sup>9</sup>Peter Goldsmith, *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 98–99, 101–102.

<sup>10</sup>“So Long, It’s Been Good to Know Yuh” was a Woody Guthrie composition about the miseries of the Dust Bowl.

umbrella of American civic ideals. Landeck summarized *Who Built America* in words that echoed Popular Front Americanism:

Here are the songs that define our democracy—all the nationalities, races and creeds living together in one peaceful community—striving for similar goals, maintaining through its law and common desires the kind of peace the world is longing for. These are the people who built America and are still building America—they are the bones of our democracy.<sup>11</sup>

In one sweeping statement Landeck set the stage for future albums that stressed democracy, cultural diversity, and a people's perspective on historical events that Folkways Records sold to American schools.

During the mid-1950s Folkways began issuing albums of songs dedicated to particular historical periods and events. In 1954 Asch released *Frontier Ballads* (featuring Pete Seeger) and *The War of 1812* (featuring Wallace House). Asch wrote the liner notes for both albums to provide a historical context for the songs. In these notes, Asch expressed his belief in cultural diversity and the freedoms inherent—though not always practiced—in American democracy. Referring to the pioneers of the nineteenth century as “the freedom seekers, the adventurers, the non-conformists, [and] the naturalists,” Asch described their westward trek as a search for freedom in the “democratic” frontier.<sup>12</sup> In Asch's view, the West was a bucolic escape for marginalized Americans, which included persecuted Mormons, oppressed urban immigrants, and economically displaced tradesmen. In his depictions of the westward migrants, Asch emphasized the importance of cultural diversity by citing Irish immigrants, Spanish settlers, Yankee migrants, and cowboys, as the paradigmatic American pioneers. However, he also depicted the injustices that American Indians endured through forced removals and the “No Irish Need Apply” phenomenon as examples of the nation failing to practice its democratic proclamations.<sup>13</sup>

### The Cold War Context

When Asch released *Frontier Ballads*, the United States was fully immersed in the Cold War, a war in which all citizens were expected to

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<sup>11</sup> Beatrice Landeck, liner notes for *Who Built America: American History Through Its Folksongs*, Folkways Records and Service Corp. (1949), 1, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>12</sup> Asch even argued that the relationship between Daniel Boone and the American Indians was symbiotic and based on trust and cooperation that was eventually ruined by settlers taking his land and the French and Spanish offers of weapons to reclaim his property; this, of course, led to the armed conflict with the American Indians who fought back to protect themselves.

<sup>13</sup> Liner notes for *Frontier Ballads*, FP5003 (FP 48-5, FP 48-6), Folkways Records and Service Corp. (1954), 2.

participate. “Neutrality,” historian Stephen Whitfield argues, “was suspect, and so was a lack of enthusiasm for defining American society as beleaguered.”<sup>14</sup> While many factors have led historians to conclude that the idea of consensus permeated American cultural politics, a key aspect of this assessment pertains to the forms that patriotic expression took during the decade. The praise that politicians and businessmen heaped upon the modern corporation for heralding an era of consumption provided the final nail in the coffin of the producerist and antimonopolist nationalism that had characterized popular Americanism up through the New Deal era. Now, the qualities that comprised the American way turned from a broad populism and faith in “the people” to a faith in “free enterprise” and a focus on domesticity and middle-class affluence.<sup>15</sup> Textbooks reflected this shift in mainstream Americanism to the extent that Whitfield is able to trace the transition from New Deal Americanism to Cold War Americanism specifically through changing definitions of democracy in civics schoolbooks. During the thirties, democracy became a “call for social action”; in the fifties, it stood for the “status quo” and something vaguely understood as the opposite of the equally ill-defined terms “Fascism” and “Communism.” Furthermore, these books presented American ideals synchronically, rather than as evolving over time. Besides painting a static view of American identity, textbook authors paid scant attention to explaining the intricacies of the U.S. economic system; overlooked any economic, political, or racial discrimination and disparities; and focused almost exclusively on extolling the virtues of capitalism rather than emphasizing the political guarantees of the Bill of Rights.<sup>16</sup>

Despite textbook companies’ acquiescence to the conservative tone of American political discourse, anticommunist crusaders in the government and private organizations paid increasing attention to public education, a situation that soon deteriorated into an assault on public schools. Anticommunist attacks on schools had actually begun as early as 1941, but after World War II they began to pick up steam, reaching a fevered pitch by the end of the decade. The most apparent result of these attacks was a high degree of censorship—censorship that anticommunist activists imposed on schools by restricting curricular materials, or that teachers self-imposed by avoiding any topic that could be deemed

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<sup>14</sup>Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>15</sup>Lary May, “Introduction,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 5; Jackson Lears, “A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society,” in *Recasting America*, 42.

<sup>16</sup>Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 57.

controversial. Those who voluntarily omitted material and avoided discussing certain subject matters did so with good reason, as various state legislatures designed laws to root out suspected subversives from the public schools. In 1949, for example, New York State passed the Feinberg Law, which enjoined the Board of Regents to compile a list of “subversive organizations,” membership of which would be grounds for dismissal. Between 1947 and 1954 over 300 teachers in New York became victims of the anticommunist purges in public schools. In 1953, the same year that the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the law in a 6-3 decision, a committee of National Education Association (NEA) members voiced their fear that the educational witch-hunts effectively denied teachers any semblance of academic freedom. They fretted that in order to adjust to the political climate, many teachers were engaging in self-censorship, which was “a far more insidious force than the overt acts of boards and legislatures.”<sup>17</sup>

Of the many accusations that anticommunist crusaders leveled against public education, the most common was that leftist teachers were indoctrinating children. Some media outlets only exacerbated this fear as papers controlled by political conservatives like Frank Gannett and R.C. Roils informed parents that schools were filling their children’s minds with communist propaganda. At a time when Americans viewed communists as superior brainwashers, governmental and private anticommunist groups became especially vigilant for signs of propagandizing.<sup>18</sup> During the 1950s, many of these groups focused their energies on scrutinizing both teachers and textbooks. In 1949, William Buckley Sr. began publishing *The Educational Reviewer* to expose any leftist sympathies in textbooks. The Conference of American Small Business Organizations released another publication of the same name that screened books that allegedly promoted “socialism, collectivist, or government interference,” or that they perceived as being “antibusiness, anticapitalist, and inherently un-American.” Mary Tallmadge, wife of the Georgia governor, had Frank Magruder’s well-respected textbook *American Government* removed from classrooms on the grounds that it placed a greater emphasis on “internationalism” rather than “nationalism” in 1951; and several school districts banned materials from UNESCO and prohibited any curricula that even mentioned the United Nations in classrooms.<sup>19</sup>

Through their collective actions, anticommunist crusaders effectively nullified academic freedom in public schools, and generated an atmosphere of intolerance that also crossed over into private

<sup>17</sup>Foster, *Red Alert*, 1–2; Hartman, *Education and the Cold War*, 81.

<sup>18</sup>Hartman, *Education and the Cold War*, 2; Foster, *Red Alert*, 17.

<sup>19</sup>Foster, *Red Alert*, 85, 95; Hartman, *Education and the Cold War*, 104–106.

education.<sup>20</sup> The fear of political reprisal put teachers and administrators on the defensive, forcing them to excise any curricula and remain silent on any topic that could be deemed remotely controversial in order to protect their jobs and their reputations. Yet, it was precisely at this time that Moses Asch began to market his own politically progressive version of American history to American schools and libraries. Although his first foray into this area was through musical records, by the end of the decade he began releasing albums of songs and historical texts, the liner notes of which featured lesson plans for guided discussions and homework assignments. Through these albums, Asch revealed his politically progressive version of Americanism, one that sharply differed from the Cold War interpretation of the nation's past and present.

Asch released the first of these albums in 1958. *The Patriot Plan*, written by Charles Edward Smith and narrated by Wallace House, used historical documents to trace the development of American democratic principles during a time when education as a whole no longer stressed such a view. In the introductory notes, Smith described the album as an exploration of the diachronic character of American democratic thought: "Combining the written and spoken word, this book-and-record project re-creates the dynamic growth of civil and human rights in Colonial America and seeks to bring into perspective the far-reaching changes in democratic concepts that occurred during that period." Through speeches and written material, the album taught students about the "evolution of Democracy," beginning with the Mayflower Compact and continuing through the years leading up to the American Revolution. However, instead of relegating this story to the past, Smith's liner notes clearly stated its contemporary relevance: "Whether we are new or old Americans or, more typically, a mixture of the two, the past has the concreteness of home and heritage. Inevitably it holds hope for the future."<sup>21</sup>

Beyond broadly declaring the album's importance for documenting the trajectory of the American democratic character, Smith situated each recording in its historical context and explained how and why it

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<sup>20</sup>Zoe Burkholder argues that anticommunists were also active in parochial education during the 1950s. She cites compelling evidence that Catholic educators and politicians in Boston and New York City actively subverted lessons promoting tolerance for Jews and African Americans. Many Catholics in New York City engaged in a letter writing campaign against intercultural education in particular, opposing the teaching of racial tolerance on the grounds that it was a form of communist indoctrination. See Zoe Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153.

<sup>21</sup>*The Patriot Plan* notes written and researched by Charles Edward Smith, Narrated by Wallace House with Kenneth Buckridge, produced by Moses Asch (1958), Folkways Records and Service Corp., 1, folder: 5710, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

contributed to the growth of American democracy. Early documents, such as the Puritan piece “A Body of Liberties,” served either to foreshadow future developments or to highlight emblematic individuals who set a democratic course. For the track “Roger Williams: A Letter to the People of Providence (1648),” Smith described Williams as “one of those individuals, rare in any land, whose tolerance was deep-rooted in a sense of humanity.” According to Smith’s text, Williams’ virtues—such as his belief in the separation of church and state, “freedom of conscience,” and his advocacy for the humane treatment of American Indians—rendered him “one of the greatest of Americans.” Other documents were included to show the development of the American conception of rights that was eventually codified in the Constitution. Excerpts of the Maryland Toleration Acts, for example, illustrated expressions of religious toleration that foreshadowed aspects of the Bill of Rights. Smith commended Samuel Adams’ “Letter of Correspondence from the Town of Boston” for emphasizing a concern for civil rights that was incorporated into the Bill of Rights, and for detailing an early version of checks-and-balances that “contributed to the blueprint for our representative form of government.” Yet, Smith attributed the greatest significance for American democratic thought to James Otis’ 1764 statement on the rights of British Colonists, which, Smith explained, “relates to many aspects of our contributions to human rights . . . it reflects evils of colonialism not altogether eradicated in some areas of the world and . . . it emphasizes, in a most clear-cut manner, the right of all, *regardless of race*, to equality” (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup> By weaving together cultural pluralism and civil rights, and locating these qualities in the foundation of American political thought, Smith and Asch depicted the civic ideals of political and cultural democracy as the crux of American national identity.

While the *Heritage, U.S.A.* album appealed to the fascination with national sacred texts like the Declaration of Independence and icons like the Founding Fathers, which were key aspects of the educational and cultural context of Cold War America, there was a clear note of subversion.<sup>23</sup> By the end of the 1940s, most teachers virtually ceased discussing race, opting instead for the term “culture” when referring to racial minorities. “Race” continued to remain absent from classrooms throughout the 1950s, precisely as the civil rights movement began to accelerate. The red scare was largely responsible for this shift, as

<sup>22</sup>Smith, *The Patriot Plan*, 2, 3, 5, 12, folder: 5710, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>23</sup>Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 233–34. Julia Mickenberg argues that education during the Cold War, specifically American history, became viewed as a way to instill “strong national loyalties” among American school children.

any discussion of racial equality or civil rights was dangerous because support for racial equality became a criterion for determining if one was sympathetic to communism.<sup>24</sup> During a time of FBI investigations and HUAC hearings, when displaying sympathy for racial egalitarianism was enough to secure a branding of “subversive,” these albums rooted American political identity in democratic rights, and called for the extension of those rights to *all* Americans. In doing so, Asch simultaneously endorsed civil rights activism and challenged the trend of teaching children not to question the political and social status quo by emphasizing diversity *and* demanding that the civil rights of all citizens, irrespective of race, be upheld. In 1955 he clearly revealed his racial views by releasing *The Glory of Negro History*, written and narrated by Langston Hughes.<sup>25</sup>

### Maintaining an Audience and Avoiding Anticommunists

Shortly after forming Folkways, Asch had developed close relationships with music retailers like Sam Goody. However, given the esoteric nature of his record catalogue, which featured blues, folk, spoken word, and other forms of nonmainstream music, he realized that he would garner more success by catering to a scholastic market and promptly directed his energies toward an educational audience. Throughout the fifties and sixties various educational conferences invited Asch to market his recordings. During the early fifties he received invitations from the National Catholic Music Educators Conference, the Catholic Library Association meeting, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development conference, the American Association of School

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<sup>24</sup>Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom*, 151. Burkholder explains that this attitude extended to interracial mixing, as a common question during loyalty investigations of state employees was if they “entertained individuals of another race at the home.” An answer in the affirmative was enough to condemn the respondent as a subversive. Julia Mickenberg also explains that textbook companies omitted references to race to appease the southern regional market, *Learning From the Left*, 252.

<sup>25</sup>Throughout his career, Asch produced records that emphasized the importance of African-American history and civil rights activism. In 1960, Folkways produced *Socialism and the American Negro*, a speech that W. E. B. DuBois gave to the Wisconsin Socialist club. The following year Asch released an album consisting of an oral account of DuBois’ autobiography and interview that he conducted with DuBois, appropriately titled: *W. E. B. DuBois: A Recorded Autobiography, Interview with Moses Asch*. During these years Asch began to document the civil rights struggles as well. In 1960 he released an album of songs that Guy Carawan (music director of Highlander Folk School) compiled from the Sit-In Movement, *The Nashville Sit-In Story: Songs and Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation (By the Sit In Participants)*. In 1961 he recorded an album of songs from the civil rights movement performed by Bill McAdoo as well as an album of recordings that he conducted with the civil rights groups, the Montgomery Gospel Trio and the Nashville Quartet, called *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Freedom Riders and the Sit-Ins*.

Administrators (a Department of the National Educational Association), and the Music Educators National Conference.<sup>26</sup> He also traveled extensively to conventions for the American Anthropological Association, the Modern Library Association, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and even became a “fixture” at the Music Library Association. As early as 1952 he recognized that libraries would be his chief clients and that he could potentially reach both music and social studies educators. According to Goldsmith, he strove to make his recordings useful “in curriculum development, in teacher training, in workshops, conventions, exhibits, and demonstrations.”<sup>27</sup> Occasionally, other record distributors even contacted Folkways, as Mario Piriano of Knight Education, Inc., did in 1960, requesting catalogues of educational material that they would then distribute through their company.<sup>28</sup> Folkways also received positive reviews from educational consultants. During the early 1960s Asch worked with Peggy Brogan, a freelance consultant from Brooklyn College. Brogan served as a liaison between Asch and educators at the Brooklyn College of Education who used Folkways, reporting their feedback on what albums worked best for educational purposes and why.<sup>29</sup> By maintaining close ties to educators, Asch ensured that his albums were marketable to an educational audience, while still promoting the version of Americanism in which he believed.

Although Asch was not a certified educator, he employed those who were in the field of education in producing (and selling) these records. In 1955 he published a pamphlet, “The Recording as a Teaching Tool: A Bulletin for Parents and Teachers,” edited by Florence B. Freedman and Esther L. Berg. The booklet contained numerous passages by teachers in primary and secondary schools as well as by college professors, all stressing the importance of music in education. Several of the educational experts argued that teaching through music allows young children to engage actively with material, and others maintained that music provides a social and cultural view that traditional school texts tended to omit. Richard E. Du Wors and William B. Weist of the department of sociology at Bucknell University praised Tony Schwartz’s Folkways record of the sounds of street life in New York City, *New York 19* (1954), because the album “creates an awareness in the student of the multi-cultured nature of city life” and suggested that teachers could use

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<sup>26</sup>Unprocessed material, folder of conference invitations in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>27</sup>Peter Goldsmith, *Making People’s Music: Moe Asch and Folkways Records* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 234.

<sup>28</sup>Letter from Mario J. Piriano to Moses Asch, 1960, 1, unprocessed material in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>29</sup>Letter from Peggy Brogan to Moses Asch, 27 March 1960, unprocessed material in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

it “to show cultural diffusion, acceptance, and transformation . . . [and] demonstrate universal values from their local expressions.” This belief that music could instill an appreciation of American cultural diversity was the underlying message of the entire pamphlet. Marguerite Cartwright of Hunter College explained in her article “The Use of Records in Intercultural Education” that teachers could effectively teach “unity within diversity” through recorded material, an argument that Angelica W. Cass of the New York State Department of Education further developed in her article “Using Records of Folk Music in Adult Education.” Cass asserted that music, especially folk music, helps students to generate informed opinions, understand historic events, and recognize “the international character of our nation.” The comprehension of American cultural pluralism that folk music provides could also help students from immigrant backgrounds to understand their role in American culture and society, according to Esther Brown of the Colorado State College of Education. Using ethnic folk music in classrooms is especially important for urban schools where, in Brown’s view, “foreign students are often made to feel ashamed of their culture, where the pressure to become ‘Americanized’ as quickly as possible is strong.” Folk music combats this tendency and allows students to accept their cultural heritage as a component of American culture, a “self-knowledge and self-respect without which democracy is impossible.”<sup>30</sup> All of these commentators emphasize ethnic and racial *diversity* in America, which is noteworthy because throughout the 1950s American educators focused on the vague concepts of “human relations” and ethnic “cultural gifts” in an effort to promote cultural tolerance while avoiding discussions of race, the result of which was that interest in racial minorities fell by the wayside.<sup>31</sup> The significance of Folkways albums, according to these educators, was that they challenged this trend and brought the recognition of ethnic and racial differences back into the classroom. Furthermore, they presented a way to bring economically marginalized citizens into the study of American history. Folklore and folk music provided a way to discuss the “common man” when an emphasis on class had become déclassé.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Richard E. Du Wors and William B. Weist, “Records in Sociology,” in *The Recording as a Teaching Tool: A Bulletin for Parents and Teachers*, ed. Esther L. Berg and Florence B. Freedman (New York: Folkways Records and Service Corp., 1955), 5; Marguerite Cartwright, “The Use of Records in Intercultural Education,” in *The Recording as a Teaching Tool*, 5; Angelica W. Cass “Using Records of Folk Music in Adult Education,” 5; Esther Brown, “Ethnic Dance in the Integrated Curriculum: Integration,” 10, Folder: “Folkways Catalogues,” Box: 3, Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>31</sup>Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom*, 153, 169.

<sup>32</sup>Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 245.

Ultimately, though he remained politically nonsectarian, Asch can be classified as a political progressive who shared many sympathies with the Left, especially an interest in politically and economically marginalized citizens. Asch's political views were grounded in a faith in the promise of democracy, and he imbued most of the albums that he released with this view. To Asch, democracy was the essence of the American identity and he did not hesitate to criticize those who tried to impede the democratic process. The liner notes to *The Coming Age of Freedom*, for example, present a critique of the national political landscape, which contrasted sharply with the democratic ideal that Americans ought to uphold:

“[W]ithin a democracy we want . . . a constant intermingling and recapitulation of forces and beliefs, a situation (never in actual balance) that we maintain only with the utmost tolerance and devotion, not mere lip-service, to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights . . . A healthy democracy, as Jefferson reminds us, is a turbulence.”

The notes continued to inform listeners that the producers of this album hoped that it would teach citizens about “the continuing maturation of democracy itself, the gradual realization of the principles inherent in the Declaration of Independence,” a realization that the nation was still in the process of achieving.<sup>33</sup>

In the political climate of the 1950s, comments like this were enough to rankle anticommunist activists. Like individual teachers and musicians, record companies could, and did, incur the wrath of the right wing. One such example was Young People's Records (YPR). Much like Folkways, YPR had its own folk music/American history record series called “Facts and Folklore” that featured albums dedicated to cowboy, sea, logging, and railroad songs in addition to iconic figures like Columbus and Daniel Boone. Despite covering the same material as Folkways, YPR fell victim to the anticommunist crusades as groups like the American Legion and papers such as the Hearst publication *The New York Journal-American* attacked the company for the album *Building a City* that it released in 1949. Two of the artists on the album appeared on the *Red Channels* list and some school districts began banning YPR albums from classrooms and libraries.<sup>34</sup>

Despite his outspoken views and his close relationships with politically controversial figures such as Pete Seeger, who also appeared

<sup>33</sup> Charles Edward Smith, *The Coming Age of Freedom*, Folkways Records Album No. FH 5006 (1959), 1, Center For Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>34</sup> David Bonner, *Revolutionizing Children's Records: The Young People's Records and Children's Record Guild Series, 1946-1977* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 100-103.

in *Red Channels*, and Irwin Silber, leftist editor of the progressive folk music magazine *Sing Out!*, Asch and Folkways Records managed to evade school blacklisting and other pressures from private anticommunist groups. In 1955 the FBI briefly put Asch under surveillance, citing suspicious albums such as *China Reconstructs* and six records of Polish folk music. Yet, the file ultimately concluded in 1956 that Folkways was a “legitimate business enterprise” and that they had “no reason to question the integrity and loyalty of its president, Marion Distler.”<sup>35</sup> Even as he escaped the blacklists, Asch expressed his solidarity with those less fortunate in his opening dedication to *Gazette*, an album of topical political songs performed by Pete Seeger, in 1958:

I have always believed that it is the duty and privilege of publishers of materials that reach a wide audience to make available to the general public as great a variety of points of view and opinions as possible—without the heavy hand of censorship or the imposition of the publishers’ editorial view . . . To those who believe in the free and uncensored expression of not only their own beliefs, but the opinions and ideas of others, I dedicate this album.<sup>36</sup>

Although McCarthy had died the previous year, his death had not signaled the end of McCarthyism. Through the close of the decade and well into the 1960s, professionals such as musicians, filmmakers, and labor leaders, as well as members of immigrant and minority groups, suffered the lingering effects of the Red Scare, especially from private groups such as the John Birch Society. Teachers continued to be subject to formal inquiries regarding their political affiliations in several states, and school textbook companies continued to bend to the same kind of social pressure, and published civics textbooks that were essentially “sermons on patriotism.”<sup>37</sup> In an atmosphere such as this, Asch’s commentary in *Gazette* was still politically risky, and yet Folkways continued to evade political censure.

Perhaps Folkways managed to fly under the political radar because, as Michael Asch claims, Asch could argue that he was simply a

<sup>35</sup>NY 105-14276, Folder: Asch Project—FBI Files.” Box: 3 “GS-505,” Peter Goldsmith Collection, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>36</sup>*Gazette: Vol. 1*, Folkways Record Album No. FN 2501 (1958), Folkways Records and Service Corp. p. 1, Folder: 2501: Seeger, *Gazette*, Vol. 1, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>37</sup>Andrew J. Dunbar, *America in the Fifties* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 115. Stephen Whitfield does note that by the end of the fifties public opinion had begun to turn against the anticommunist crusading. HUAC largely fell from grace as politicians such as Harry Truman and James Roosevelt criticized it and students protested hearings in 1960 in San Francisco. See Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 124. Yet, anticommunist groups still leveled significant political power and the entertainment blacklist continued to operate.

businessman trying to succeed in a capitalist society, and “what could be more American than that?”<sup>38</sup> Yet, it is more likely that Folkways survived because it was a small enterprise unlike YPR, which was widely popular, and because it was a commercial company that marketed albums largely to individual teachers (rather than whole school districts) and libraries. In many respects, Folkways operated in a similar manner to children’s trade books in the 1950s and early 1960s. According to Mickenberg, trade books were rarely blacklisted because, unlike textbooks that were sold in mass quantities and subject to local, state, and federal scrutiny, schools and libraries carried a limited number of each title. Additionally, since publishers released multiple titles every year, anticommunist groups could not feasibly scrutinize each one. Likewise, the educational albums that Folkways released represented only a fraction of the company’s catalogue—a catalogue from which teachers and librarians could select various titles for educational use. Furthermore, as Mickenberg explains, librarians had more leeway than teachers and were able to maintain progressive sympathies even as anticommunists bore down on teachers. Therefore, certain materials continued to appear in libraries even as they were banished from classrooms.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps, then, Asch was able to save his company by devising a business strategy that specifically targeted librarians and the occasional progressive teacher, in addition to keeping a low profile.

### The Folk Music Revival and Folkways Records

Near the end of the 1950s, the first school children who had learned of folk music through Folkways Records began to come of age, and many contributed to pushing folk music up the music charts during the late fifties and early sixties. Commonly referred to as the folk music revival, or folk boom, the massive popularity of folk music became one of the defining cultural phenomena of the 1960s. Although popular interest in folk music had begun earlier in the decade, historians generally trace the beginning of the folk music boom to 1958 when the Kingston Trio hit the airwaves with their rendition of the Appalachian murder ballad “Tom Dooley.” The Trio became widely famous shortly after releasing their first album, but they did not hold onto their musical monopoly for long. Soon groups based on their model mushroomed across the country. The newfound popularity of folk-singing groups like the Trio led mainstream media outlets to adapt to the times. Even the *New York Times* had a folk music critic, Robert Shelton, who observed that by

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<sup>38</sup>Asch, “Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting: Some Personal Reflections,” 6.

<sup>39</sup>Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 4–5, 15–16, 142.

the early sixties folk music had become a definite part of the musical mainstream: "A longer perspective may revise this view, but it appears from a distance of a few months that 1962 was the year when the folk-music revival outlived its period as a fad and became an established staple in the popular-music diet of this country's listeners."<sup>40</sup> Shelton's observation was correct; by 1962 folk music officially hit the big time. In popular culture, the years between 1960 and 1965 are viewed as the era of *the* folk revival. As a record producer who specialized in folk music throughout the fifties, Asch became one of the key members of the revival.

In the midst of the folk boom, Folkways Records continued to release albums designed for educational purposes. The early years of the 1960s were particularly conducive to this type of program. With the onset of widespread interest in folk music, the educational value of this genre became a *cause celebre* among many progressive educators and members of the folk-music community. Contributors to the *New York Folklore Quarterly* particularly engaged with questions of how to incorporate folk music into social studies and civics curricula, and how this music could teach American children about the global community. In 1962, John Anthony Scott argued that folklore (and music) should be taught in primary and secondary schools, not as a separate subfield, but as an integral part of American history classes. Scott explained that, because folk music transcended national boundaries, it could give school children the ability to attain a "whole sense of the unity of our world, the unity of its peoples and even the brotherhood of man."<sup>41</sup> Therefore, folk music could provide students with a deeper understanding of their own heritage and the cultures of people around the world, thus making them aware of their place in national and international contexts. In many ways, Asch shared a similar view, which he continued to express in his recordings.

In 1960 Asch released two records, complete with detailed curricula, geared for junior high and high school history and social studies classes. Unlike earlier albums such as *The Patriot Plan* that had focused on spoken word rather than music, these records alternated song tracks with narrated documents. The first album, *American History in Ballad and Song*, prepared by Albert Barouch and Theodore O. Cron, contained songs selected for their "maximum effective use" in seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade sections. Each song was followed by "thought questions," and every section concluded with homework assignments.

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<sup>40</sup>Robert Shelton, "Fad to Staple: Disks Reflect 'Arrival' of Folk Music as Part of Country's Popular Arts," *New York Times*, 28 April 1963, 144.

<sup>41</sup>John Anthony Scott, "Folklore and Folksong in Education," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1962): 294–95.

These albums presented a progressive, pluralist, and prodemocratic view of American history, with assignments that ensured that this message was explicit. For example, a homework question following a song that detailed the plight of Irish immigrants, “Shamrock,” asked, “What contributions have the different religious, ethnic, and national groups made to America? Can you list several specific examples?” The “Development of Democracy” section opened with an eighteenth-century song on suffrage, “Free Elections,” which explained the importance of the vote. A homework question following this piece was even more relevant to both historical and contemporary problems: “Since the vote is so precious, some people would like to prevent fellow Americans from using it. Can you give examples of this?” If the message behind this question was too subtle, students were also instructed, “In a summary paragraph, explain why this is dangerous for everyone.”<sup>42</sup>

Through these albums, Asch continued to promote a version of American history that emphasized national civic ideas such as democracy and racial/ethnic pluralism. Political progressives in the field of children’s literature often adopted a similar approach. Often, Mickenberg explains, leftist children’s authors of the Cold War era used the past to challenge present circumstances. As textbooks ignored anything divisive in American society, trade books on American history “represented a return of the repressed,” introducing young readers to African-American, labor, and women’s history.<sup>43</sup> *American History in Ballad and Song* followed this same premise, as subsequent sections on the Early Republic, Nineteenth Century Immigration, the Civil War, Industrialization, and the American Farmer, highlighted politically and economically marginalized Americans. The Industrialization section focused almost exclusively on the poor working conditions that early industrial workers suffered as well as the unionization drives they embraced to uphold their rights. Songs such as “My Children are Seven in Number” taught about the 1933 coal strikes in Davidson and Wilder, Tennessee, and the students were asked to list the miners’ grievances as well as the advantages that mine owners had—and “exploited over”—the workers. The section continued with songs from textile mill strikes, such as “Mill Mother’s Lament” by Ella May Wiggins, a union organizer who was killed during a strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929. This preceded “The Death of Harry Simms,” about another union organizer murdered by company guards during a coal strike in

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<sup>42</sup> *American History in Ballad and Song, Vol. 1: Junior High Social Studies*, Album 5801, (1960), prepared by Albert Barouch and Theodore O. Cron, 1, 3, 8, Folder 5801: “American History, Vol. 1,” Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>43</sup> Mickenberg, *Learning From the Left*, 234–35.

Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1932. Students were again asked to recognize the grievances that the workers had and to determine what the government could do to help them. The “thought question” directed students to explain why workers would want to unionize, and one of the homework assignments instructed students to imagine being a union organizer for mill workers and write a speech that would convince them to organize. After this, the American Farmer section explored the nineteenth-century Populist Movement, the injustices of the sharecropping and tenant farming systems, and the Dust Bowl through the songs, “Raggedy,” “Seven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat,” and “Dust Storm Disaster.” The collection concluded with the section called *The World of Man*, which featured Japanese Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Polish, Hungarian, and South African songs.<sup>44</sup> Although the anticommunist fervor was subsiding, these albums addressed several issues that remained politically condemnable. According to Stuart Foster, educators could be reported for addressing such topics as “consumer education . . . the brotherhood of man, peaceful solutions to international matters, the dignity of labor, and democratic human relations,” topics that both these albums featured prominently.<sup>45</sup>

Volume II of this series was geared for high school social studies classes, specifically for sophomore through senior students. Taking a more thematic, rather than chronological, approach, this set centered on variations of “democracy” with sections dedicated to cultural, political, economic, and international democracy. In this volume, the political undertones became glaring overtones. The first section, on cultural democracy, delved deeper into investigating the components of American national identity, again paying attention to the influence of immigrant cultures. Students were asked to determine what factors pulled different immigrants to the United States, where various groups settled, what hardships they faced and how these hardships had been eased through governmental legislation. The discussion of immigration soon turned into an investigation of American xenophobia through Woody Guthrie’s “Two Good Men,” about the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, and the song “Sherman Wu,” about the discrimination that Chinese students experienced in American colleges. Closing the section on cultural democracy was a popular contemporary Puerto Rican song and a documentary clip of Puerto Rican migrants arriving at Idlewild (Kennedy) Airport in New York. The section emphasized

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<sup>44</sup>*American History in Ballad and Song: Vol. 2 Senior High School Social Studies*, prepared by Albert Barouch and Theodore O. Cron (1962), Folkways Records Album No. FH 5802 FraSC, Folder: 5802: “American History, V. 2,” 9, 14-15, 16-17, 21, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>45</sup>Foster, *Red Alert*, 185.

cultural diversity, directing students to examine how the United States had dealt with the plurality of ethnic cultures. The songs emphasized the importance of cultural pluralism, while the homework and discussion questions encouraged students to ponder for themselves the costs and benefits of living in a heterogeneous society.

The Economic Democracy section continued to investigate American history from “the people’s” perspective. Les Rice’s “Banks of Marble,” about the people taking over the banks through collective action, dealt with laissez-faire capitalism and the public versus private debate, concluding with: “Then we’d own those banks of marble / With no guard at every door / And we’d share those vaults of silver / That we all have sweated for! (repeat).” Union activist Aunt Molly Jackson’s description of oppressive labor conditions in Harlan County, Kentucky, and Woody Guthrie’s song about the 1914 massacre of striking workers and their families in Colorado, “Ludlow Massacre,” introduced students to labor history. Again, the authors encouraged students to come to their own conclusions, but they revealed their intentions through such questions as: “In a society of law—such as ours—violence must be punished. But in situations such as the Ludlow Massacre, who is to be punished? What conclusion must be drawn about economic wars?”<sup>46</sup> The theme of the downtrodden continued throughout the next section: Political Democracy. This section opened with the observation that universal suffrage is essential for a democratic government, but that throughout American history several groups, such as women, have been excluded from voting. One assignment then prompted students to list other groups who did not have the right to vote and to cite any groups who were presently disenfranchised; the third part of the section featured a Martin Luther King Jr. speech calling for the right to vote for African Americans in the South. The section continued with the hardships that migrant workers had endured and closed with McCarthy’s “abuse” of Americans’ constitutional rights during the prior decade.<sup>47</sup>

Despite promoting what could be interpreted as a dated or controversial view of American history to schoolchildren, Folkways Records received numerous letters commending the company specifically for its educational endeavors. In 1960, George G. Dawson, an assistant professor in the Social Studies Department of New York University, had written to Asch about an article that he wrote on the use of folk music as a teaching tool. In the letter he had complimented Folkways for their albums and remarked on how successful they had been in his American history classes. Even students wrote to express their

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<sup>46</sup>*American History in Ballad and Song: Vol. 2 Senior High School Social Studies*, 8–10, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 13–17.

appreciation. In a letter to Marion Distler, a student named Dan Harris stated, “I respect it [Folkways] not so much as a record company, for on that score it is among the best, but as an instrument for the promotion of culture and education.” Furthermore, he noted the political persuasion of Folkways—or at least those who were fans of the company—by commenting that he was first introduced to their records when his history teacher, “a bit of a leftist,” played some albums of social protest music. He wrote, “I was tremendously impressed (and one doesn’t have to have any particular political leanings to love the records).”<sup>48</sup> Even the writers at *The Little Sandy Review*, a folk music magazine that often lambasted those who used folk music for political purposes, lauded Asch’s educational efforts. The reviewer Edmund Gilbertson praised the album *American History in Ballad and Song, Vol. 1*:

I absolutely turn green with envy of today’s enlightened junior high social classes when I find that they can study the problems of the American farmer by listening to Woody Guthrie sing “Dust Storm Disaster”; learn about colonial hardship with Peggy Seeger’s “When I was Single”; study the causes of industrial fair play legislation by hearing Pete Seeger sing “The Blind Fiddler”; and so on. Ah, progress!<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, these albums did represent progress by presenting a more complex view of American history during a time when textbooks continued to tell the story of national development through the lens of stereotypes or lies of omission.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

These recordings clearly present a leftwing view of American history and identity reminiscent of 1930s Popular Front Americanism. As Denning argues, the cultural formation of the Left in the 1930s and 1940s was a powerful current that transcended the Communist Party, from which it had originally emerged. Therefore, some leftwing sympathizers managed to retain enough autonomy from the Party to survive the

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<sup>48</sup>Letter from George G. Dawson to Folkways, 29 March 1960; Letter from Dan Harris to Marion Distler, 27 August 1960, unprocessed material in Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>49</sup>Edmund Gilbertson, *American History in Ballad and Song, Vol. 1* review, *The Little Sandy Review*, No. 9, 20.

<sup>50</sup>John Higham, “Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and a Critique,” *American Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (June 1993): 210. Higham notes that through the late 1950s, history textbooks did mention the hardships ethnic groups faced but explained them via stereotypes and the disadvantages that plagued different groups. The hope was that all of these lumps in the American dream would then be smoothed in the national melting pot.

political repression of the red scare, albeit with bruises. Moses Asch is an example of such a figure. When depicting the lingering cultural spirit of the Popular Front during the 1950s, Denning appeals to Stuart Hall's assessment that even when "social forces" are defeated in the larger political or social landscape they do not disappear entirely. Even though the Popular Front had faded from American political culture, holdouts like Moses Asch sustained its emphasis on the people and the democratic ideals that were embedded in the movement.

Another way to illustrate these albums' political and cultural significance is through Verta Taylor's concept of social movement "abeyance mechanisms." Taylor explains that certain abeyance mechanisms that exist within social movements enable the movements to continue through politically hostile periods and therefore provide continuity between periods of heightened activism. When movements lose public support, thus entering a period of abeyance, the members who retain their commitment to the cause tend to become marginalized and are forced to "create or find a niche for themselves." While these groups may not make an impact on the sociopolitical conditions of their era, their significance lies in their ability to provide "a legitimating base to challenge the status quo" and, as such, become potent sources for protest.<sup>51</sup> Through these albums, Folkways became an abeyance mechanism for the Left—championing the ideas of peace, democracy, and social justice that had been at the center of the Popular Front, and ideas that would become the ideological crux of the New Left that emerged in the following decade. Each record spelled out what needed to be done to achieve lasting political reform, and provided ways to challenge the social and political status quo. Looking beyond institutional politics, we are able to see how activists like Asch worked to keep the Left's political torch lit throughout the 1950s.

Much of the success of these albums is revealed anecdotally through letters from appreciative listeners. Unfortunately, there is little record of how many of these albums Asch sold from year to year.<sup>52</sup> In many respects, these albums are overshadowed by Folkways' numerous titles in folk music, ethnic music, and jazz recordings. Historians remember Asch for producing the seminal *Anthology of American Folk Music* and

<sup>51</sup>Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 4 (Oct. 1989): 761–62.

<sup>52</sup>At the time of this article, the complete ledgers of Folkways Records from the 1950s were unavailable. The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has just begun the accession of the ledgers of Folkways Records. However, Asch was notorious for keeping vague and incomplete records, such that the exact amount is very difficult to determine. Even in Goldsmith's extensive biography of Asch and Richard Carlin's study of the company, *Worlds of Sound: The Story of Smithsonian Folkways* (Smithsonian Books: 2008), there is no mention of the financial records regarding the educational albums.

for recording Lead Belly and Woody Guthrie far more than they do for his educational series. Yet, the significance of these records lay not in the size of the audience, but rather in the fact that they were produced during such a politically oppositional period. They are thus a critical part of the story of how leftwing Americans sustained a politically and socially progressive Americanism during the second red scare, a view that carried into the rise of activism in the 1960s when early members of the New Left sought to bring economically marginalized and politically disenfranchised citizens in the democratic process. In many respects, young activists of the civil rights movement and the New Left endeavored to put the democratic ideals that older political progressives such as Asch espoused into practice by conducting citizenship-training classes through the Mississippi Freedom Schools and fighting urban poverty through the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), which focused on grassroots community organization. While the leftwing activity of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1960s is well documented, figures like Asch reveal that this idealism had not abated during the 1950s. As American intellectuals lamented the increasing homogenization of American culture and society during the era of alleged consensus and grey flannel suits, Moses Asch and other political progressives endeavored to teach children about an American past and present that were both democratic and diverse.