If Soyer's portraits seemed to affirm the value of traditional skills, Solman's showed that modernist pictorial discipline could be reconciled with an effective signification of the appearance and character of the sitter. His indebtedness to the Expressionist tradition was unmistakable, and the single colour background and angular drawing of Eddie clearly refer to devices developed by van Gogh, of whose work the Metropolitan Museum showed a major exhibition in the winter of 1949–50. In this respect, his art resembles that of his friend Neel who, while she saw herself as a realist, was also a self-conscious modernist. However, there are key differences. Neel's sitters often seem animated, caught in some transitory expression; Solman's are impassive, so that almost the whole burden of denoting character is borne by the formal means, which have a kind of independent value. Commenting on this aspect of Solman's work in 1958, Arts magazine observed: 'As a result of such precision, deliberation, imposition, the generally grave beings in Solman's portraits have weight, not vivacity.' By contrast, in Neel's the formal means are only deployed in as far as they are necessary to project an idea of character, and appear to have no function beyond that end. This corresponds with the primary impulse behind her 'pictures of people', which were to serve as a social and historical record of her times, a Balzacian Comédie Humaine.

Of the three artists on whom this section is focussed, Neel was the one who remained most publicly involved with the Communist world. She contributed illustrations to Masses & Mainstream and to Communist books, attended the Writers and Critics group that met at Annette Rubinstein's apartment on the Upper West Side, and took classes with Howard Selsam, Jerome and Finkelstein at the Party's Jefferson School. Her 1951 show at the Party-backed New Playwrights Theatre and 1954 exhibition at the ACA Gallery included portraits of well-known Communist figures, and the first of these also contained an agitational painting that supported one of the most publicised campaigns of the Civil Rights Congress, Save Willie McGee (Estate of Alice Neel). In 1981, eighty-five of her works were shown at the Union of Artists of the USSR exhibition hall in Moscow, in a display she herself partly financed.

Yet Neel acknowledged that she was 'never a good Communist', and her continuing loyalty to the Party seems surprising at one level, given the consistent commitment to bohemiaism that later drew her into the orbit of the Beats in the 1960s. In this regard, she is representative of that type of woman artist and intellectual who gravitated to the CP because – whatever its limitations – it offered the most sustained critique available of class, racial and sexual inequality, a type already encountered in Elizabeth Olds. Two impressive free verse poems and a short story from 1929 show Neel as having already developed a sharp awareness of women's oppression, and she later claimed: 'I have always believed that women should resist and refuse to accept all the gratuitous insults that men impose upon them.' Moreover, she was self-consciously an intellectual. 'I am an intellectual. I am sick of trash', she responded to an interviewer who asked her in 1979 if she could appre-
discourse of affirmative humanism is suggested by Gold's account of statements by her in a contemporary notice in the Daily Worker: "I am against abstract and non-objective art," said Alice Neel to this reporter, "because such art shows a hatred of human beings ... East Harlem is like a battlefield of humanism, and I am on the side of the people there, and they inspire my painting." Her statement for her Whitney Museum retrospective of 1974 offered a rudimental critique of reification: 'Man in our present society cannot compete with the forces against which he is pitted, so he technologises himself and denies his own humanity.' Men's treatment of women she understood as an extension of the same process.

Neel evidently saw her 'pictures of people' as pitted against this process of dehumanisation, and that was certainly how her exhibits of 1950–51 were presented in the Party press. The fact that so many of the paintings she showed in these years represented the working class of Spanish Harlem, where Neel lived from 1938 to 1962, must have added to their appeal at a time when the Party was particularly preoccupied with racial issues. Moreover, the predominantly Puerto Rican population of El Barrio was markedly radical in political orientation, supporting numerous left-wing clubs and organisations, not suprisingly considering the Party's fierce criticism of US imperialism in their homeland. In 1951, the Daily Worker's Charles Corwin wrote of her 'portraits of friends and Puerto Rican neighbours': 'They are not portraits in the limited sense of the term but depictions of men and women ... behind whose individual features and individual vitality lie the more generalized features and vitality of large sections of humanity.' However, while Neel's portraits of political activists such as Mike Gold (1951; Estate of Alice Neel) and Edward Pinekey Greene (Collection Katherine H. Cole) or of the black actress and playwright Alice Childress (1950; Estate of Alice Neel) might carry conviction as positive images, Gold noted that '[s]ome of the melancholy of the region hangs over her work' and Corwin detected 'an underlying sense of pessimism' running through all of it. Indeed, pictures such as TB in Harlem (1940; Estate of Alice Neel) and The Spanish Family (1943; fig. 177) suggest a dignified endurance of poverty, rather than any struggle against it. Moreover, despite Neel's realist subject matter, it was rather hard to escape the connotations of her Expressionist devices as signifying personal anguish. The artist had, in fact, been hospitalised for attempted suicide after a nervous breakdown in 1930, and had endured years of poverty living on WPA and public assistance. In 1979 she described herself as a 'morbid person' who had wanted to commit suicide all her life. Given her emphasis on artistic authenticity, the style of her art had to correspond to her own life as well as that of her subjects, so that whatever her embrace of 'humanism', this meant her work simply did not match the optimistic platitudes of Zhdanovism, either technically or symbolically.

As I have shown, the Party's cultural cadre were as divided on Zhdanovism as they had been on earlier versions of the Stalinist aesthetic. Strangely, however, Neel's personal loyalties lay more with the hardliners Gold and Philip Bonoisky than with more expansive thinkers such as Humboldt. Indeed, in a debate in Masses & Mainstream over 'Lars Lawrence's' novel Morning, Noon and Night in 1955, she supported Bonoisky, who had criticised the author's depiction of Communist organisers in a New Mexico mining town as too 'naturalistic', as over-psychological and unhheroic, and argued that what was needed rather was images of 'people who are moved to act from the deepest love of other humans, from the profoundest knowledge of their mission in history.' In a letter to the magazine, Neel stressed 'the responsibility of the writer to reflect in the most advanced and humanistic way any part of the life of his day', and invoked actually existing 'heroes' such as the Smith Act prisoners and the Rosenbergs: 'A strong wind is blowing and meager is the heart who cannot see the heroes.' For Neel, the Communist activists she painted were heroes. Indeed, she is likely to have seen such works as the pictorial equivalent of Communist biographies such as Bonoisky's Brother Bill McKie - a book published in the same year that Neel painted its subject, and one its author described as 'a great opportunity to show everyone what a real Communist looked like' in the face of the demonisation of the Party in the mainstream media. In this regard, the ordinariness of Neel's Communist portraits - which Pamela Allara has rightly stressed - may have been pointed.

We can understand Gold's support of Neel's work, I think, by seeing its direct and unglamourised mode of portrayal, its seeming stylelessness, as corresponding with the straightforward setting down of truth he had envisaged as characterising proletarian art in the years around 1930. Her quotidian portrayals of Communists followed from the essentially naturalist premis of her procedures: her belief that once her sitters were at ease before the easel, they would adopt their most symptomatic and revealing attitudes: 'Before painting, when I talk to the person, they unconsciously assume their most characteristic pose, which in a way involves all their character and social standing - what the world has done to them and their retaliation.' It is striking that the most impressive of these portraits, those of the labour journalist Art Shields (fig. 178) and of the union organiser Bill McKie (fig. 179), should look almost like homages to van Gogh. This is unlikely to have been coincidental, given the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition of 1949–50. The plain-coloured background and angular drawing of Art Shields parallels that of several of van Gogh's portraits of the Arles period, such as L'Arlesienne (1888), which was bequeathed to the museum in the same year as the former was painted. The way in which the sitter's outline interacts with the canvas edge - to compensate for the lack of naturalistic space - is also a characteristic of van Gogh device, and one that Neel used in Bill McKie and many other works. Like van Gogh, she also jettisoned the inventory of lifestyle attributes characteristic of nineteenth-century naturalistic portraiture. And, like Soyer's, her sitters appear in the seemingly neutral space of the artist's studio, with no signs of their social selves but their choice of clothes and their physiognomies. In her view the face showed 'everything' about her sitters: 'Their inheritance, their class, their profession. Their feelings, their intellect. All that's happened to them.'
At the height of American Zhdanovism, it was inevitable that the elements in van Gogh's art that seemed to point towards modernism would be viewed with a chilly eye in the Party press. On the other side, the catalogue to the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition suggested that the artist's 'continuing appeal may lie in his unique ability to suggest those tensions and dislocations under which man lives today', and connected it with existentialism and the vogue for writers such as Dostoyevsky and Kafka — in other words connecting the artist to precisely those aspects of contemporary culture in which Communists found the symptoms of bourgeois decadence. However, van Gogh had long been a Communist hero, and although an appraisal of the exhibition by W. T. Bürger criticised the Symbolist elements in his later work, it simultaneously stressed that the influence of Gauguin's Synthetism and a perceived orientation to the market did not submerge his 'humanitarianism', which was revealed in his 'persistent desire to be a “figure painter”': 'those figure studies he did — the postman Roulin...Roulin's son Armand, the “Berceuse,” the splendid old peasant in a straw hat... are as suffused with sympathy as with rich color.' Further, if Neel looked outside the Communist press — as there is every reason to believe she would — she could have found a very different evaluation of van Gogh's art in Meyer Schapiro's 1950 monograph. Here, van Gogh is said to have abandoned only the genre and form of his early peasant paintings (which appealed more unequivocally to Communist sensibilities) in his later work, but developed the 'basic human program' they represented in a different style. Schapiro provided a particularly insightful account of the portraits of the Arles period, which emphasised both their non-commissioned character and natural poses. Van Gogh, he explained, had seen the portrait as 'the future of modern art', and produced 'the first democratic portraits', portraits that 'would have pleased Whitman especially.' The similarities between van Gogh's programme as Schapiro described it and Neel's are as striking as the formal similarities identified above. Neel rarely used such non-naturalistic colour backgrounds as that of Art Shields, perhaps because she understood that for van Gogh (and more generally) they signified a kind of spirituality alien to her own emphatically materialist approach. In the next decade, she established her distinctive manner of negotiating the demands of the picture surface through summary drawing of non-essentials in painted outlines and passages of raw canvas, devices that signified space and objects with only minimal concessions to conventional perspective.

At the point where this study ends, all three of the artists I have been considering still had some of their finest works ahead of them. This is particularly so with Neel, who achieved more consistent levels of professionalism without sacrificing the original qualities of her approach after her career took off in the early 1960s. Despite the absence of a living Communist movement, they remained artists of the left, and all were drawn to paint the Beats in the 1960s as the latest manifestation of resistance to American bourgeois mores. Inevitably, however, the enduring commitment to a 'humanist art' that endured as a relic of their earlier political allegiances put them increasingly at odds with their times and drew them into the orbit of the National Academy of Design. As the controversies of the 1950s receded, the implications of their attachment to the figure were obscured, and they came to seem just upholders of traditional skills and outmoded aesthetics.