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Does any political formation dominate its century of American history the way the New Deal dominates the 20th? Almost as soon as Franklin Roosevelt's Brain Trust convened, the earlier Progressive movement was revised into the status of forerunner; for decades after the New Deal order began to disintegrate in the late 1960s, Americans lived in its historical debris. Nearly the entire century, in other words, was annexed in one way or another, at least at the level of historical imagination.

It is precisely the scale of the New Deal as an event in political history that makes it so elusive to historical explanation, and so yielding to constant revision. In two new books, historians Jefferson Cowie and Kiran Klaus Patel attempt major efforts to see the events of the 1930s and 1940s in new light. Cowie, in *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*, takes a long view, assessing the solidaristic liberalism of the 20th century's middle third as an anomaly within the otherwise continuous course of American political history. In his *The New Deal: A Global History*, Patel makes a move orthogonal to Cowie's: he places the New Deal within a synchronic worldwide political landscape, seeing it as one of many regimes under extreme economic pressure, grasping for solutions from a globally shared policy repertoire.

For Cowie, the emergence and strength of New Deal liberalism can be explained only as the result of historical chance. Drawing heavily on Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, he argues that the twin calamities of depression and world war intruded into American history as if from another story, suspending the rules of American political life, which otherwise tend toward rising inequality and elite power. These rules are the weak state, antagonism between immigrants and native-born and between white

and black, the sway of religion, and the power of individualist ideology. Cowie organizes each of his chapters around these themes, providing summaries of the scholarship on each subject as it snaked across the century.

Before 1929, these entrenched conservative forces conspired against working-class unity. Streams of immigrants renewed foreign cultures in American cities, undercutting economic and political citizenship and dividing workers from each other. Even more explosively, workers were divided along racial lines, while partisan politics assumed the exclusion of the black citizenry. Workers were preached at by priests and ministers hostile to radicalism, and in many cases, participated actively in conservative religious movements and culture. And, Cowie argues, they often bought in ideologically to what employers peddled. Paternalist 'welfare capitalist programs', he writes, 'won the allegiance of many employees through employee stock ownership plans, recreation clubs, sports teams, loans, education, and employee representation organizations – that is to say, company unions' (p. 86). Although it is clear why these conservative forms of collective life – ethnic, racial, and religious consciousness, mass participation in non-market paternalist institutions – would undercut class solidarity, it is less so how they square with the putative power of individualist ideology.

When the Depression struck, the rules were suspended. Immigration had slowed to a halt over the previous 15 years, allowing communities to Americanize; the Democratic Party internalized racial animosity and contained it through Faustian compromise; above all, the crash discredited individualism. The minor theme of American history, proletarian solidarity, could thus express itself. Cowie calls this period the 'working-class interregnum'. Still, he argues, it was only through a wrenching process that New Deal liberalism emerged over the course of a decade, in the teeth of recalcitrant opposition drawing on all the traditional sources of conservative power. An alien presence in American political culture – a politics of collective social rights – took hold only briefly.

Cowie sees conservative dominance as endemic to American history and not specific to particular events or moments. Accordingly, the traditional rules began to reassert themselves quickly after their short exile. The individualist bent of the New Left represents, for Cowie, the persistent power of the old regime, returning from its brief exile to capture the left as well as the right. The emergence of the religious right, the white backlash against the black freedom struggle, and the ideological triumph of neoliberal economics all soon signaled the end of the New Deal exception and the resumption of business as usual. Cowie rechristens the 'Reagan revolution' a 'restoration' (p. 206).

Cowie is continuing the liberal tradition in labor history, exemplified by Robert Zieger, whose characterization of the industrial union movement as a 'fragile juggernaut' he quotes on the first page of *The Great Exception's* introduction. In line with this tradition, he rejects the materialist forms of explanation that prevail further left in the field. Cowie writes, 'The presence of a set of countervailing powers to that of business was crucial to the postwar paradigm. And if the politics matters then political culture must be foundational to that story' (p. 16). Repeatedly returning to the point, Cowie makes an explicit embrace of an idealist form of historical explanation. This move threatens to put him in league with the old 'Consensus' school of historiography, which argued that liberal individualism dominated American history and suppressed social conflict. Cowie distances himself from them in substance by arguing that there was dissent aplenty, only of insufficient potency to displace the dominant ideology. But he echoes those historians in form, by arguing that concrete events have been subordinate effects of the power of a historically transcendent national ideology.

The Great Exception sets itself an admirable challenge. The book seeks nothing less than to demote the most familiar and successful form of centre-left politics in American history from its cherished status, in order to make room for new possibilities. Approaching this question exclusively on the grounds of political culture and ideology, however, makes change difficult to understand in the past except as pure accident, and even harder to imagine in the future; if it comes accidentally, it cannot be brought about deliberately. Cowie, in a bid to avoid utter despair, grasps for a proposed answer in his conclusion, where he urges the rehabilitation

of the Progressive movement as a substitute for the totemic New Deal. Progressives, he writes, 'made the best of the power of individualism in American political culture, affirmed a vision of democratic life across class (if decidedly not always racial) lines, and sought a bridge between individualism and a common good' (p. 226). If one conceives of American history as a process essentially internal and subordinate to a dominant ideology, and events like the Depression as raw intrusions of contingency, then historical novelty only happens randomly and fleetingly; there is nothing new and lasting under the sun. Accordingly, there is reason to imagine that the only resort is to the repertoire of the past. And if the New Deal will no longer do, why not the Progressives, who lived in a time somewhat more like our own?

There is, however, another view available. The Depression and the war can just as well be understood as themselves products of social inequality rather than unrelated contingencies; an approach beginning in political economy rather than political culture would be likelier to go down this path. New Deal liberalism can, in this light, appear as historically specific to a set of particular conditions, rather than the simple negation of the briefly-weakened dominant tendencies, as it appears in *The Great Exception*. The era since the 1970s, while superficially resembling the Gilded Age, might yet have its own specific characteristics, rather than being regression to the mean – Cowie's 'restoration.' In this case, the New Deal would look like a moment in a sequence of moments, each different from what came before and after. *The Great Exception* sets out to demote the New Deal; in an odd way, though, the book instead elevates midcentury liberalism, raising it right out of the ordinary stream of history.

Patel's *The New Deal* is less ambitious at the interpretive level, and more so empirically. The approach is a relatively straightforward and traditional political history, dispensing with the residual social history present in *The Great Exception*. Patel's methodological intervention, rather, is in his scope of inquiry, which spans the globe. America's New Deal, he argues, was one among a vast array of national programs for addressing the economic crisis of the 1930s. It differed from its counterparts in some ways; it resembled them in others. Policy ideas flowed across national boundaries in many directions, while at the same time American actions had a disproportionate impact on the world scene, due to the hesitant ascension of the United States into global economic and political power. 'Societies around the world simultaneously faced similar questions and threats, however different their longer trajectories, the precise ways in which problems intersected, and the answers eventually chosen,' Patel writes. 'In such a view, the New Deal was but a distinct, national variation within a larger pattern, and its domestic and foreign dimensions were powerfully linked' (pp. 1–2). The sweeping view that emerges is impressive.

The world that the Depression struck was one that was increasingly interconnected. The famous, ruinous 'deglobalization' that happened in the crisis was only possible, of course, because of decades of growing connection between nations. Even the First World War ultimately tightened the bands between countries, through the mechanisms of war debt and the international institutions that sprang up after Versailles. These political and economic interconnections meant that the immediate American response to the crash – 'self-seclusion,' in Patel's words – was particularly disastrous for the rest of the world. One need only think of the abandonment of the Spanish Republic, an eventual result of the isolationist strand of American politics, as an example.

The crisis wrecked ruling regimes around the world. The collapse of Republican dominance in the United States, while a relatively peaceable example, was one of many such transitions. Did this political transition represented a more profound crisis of democracy – a question familiar from other countries? The issue was highly present in the United States as well, where Roosevelt's popularity and policy experimentation quickly drew whispers about dictatorship. Generally, a search for a 'third way' between laissez-faire and communism prevailed. Fascism was one such third way; so were the various strands of social democracy of which the New Deal was one. Generally, the 'third way' efforts were less-than-coherent waves of experimentation, more committed to taking action than to any analysis. Patel is at his strongest comparing resulting programs. For example, in his discussion of the Civilian Conservation Corps and its international counterparts (drawing on his own prior primary research), he writes that all such programs 'were designed to kill several birds with one stone by overcoming the slump through work creation and vocational training,

strengthening the weakened and depleted through regular meals and physical exercise, disciplining the young through strictly organized camps to counter all sorts of deviance (particularly criminality and political extremism), and shoring up heterosexual masculinity' (p. 89). Something of the underlying conjunctural similarities of the different 'New Deals' is revealed here.

But there was more than mere parallelism between political regimes. The New Deal, Patel contends, was a mode of foreign policy as well as domestic. Given that Roosevelt came to power more on the wreckage of the previous administration than any clear program, his ventures overseas were marked by incoherence and passivity. It was not until the late 1930s that the administration's approach began to cohere. This is a well-known narrative, though Patel tells it compellingly: the failure of American policymakers to grasp their own weight in the world worsened the global political and economic crises, further linking their fates to those of other nations.

Another form of transnational interaction took place in intellectual and policy exchange. Here Patel extends forward and amends Daniel Rodgers's argument in *Atlantic Crossings*. He notes that the New Deal and its counterparts around the world swept in new generations of policymakers eager to make breaks with the past. They found each other across borders. The Inquiry on Cooperative Enterprise, for example, toured Europe in the middle 1930s, assembling a case for importing Scandinavian-style consumer cooperatives across the Atlantic. So too, on the other end of the political spectrum, policymakers in charge of Japanese internment studied practices from Britain and Canada. Still, 'for all its inclusiveness', Patel writes, 'the American way set clear limits to the idea of foreign borrowing. It was the extreme exception that proved the rule when, in 1938, Roosevelt personally ordered several reports on Nazi welfare schemes, and when in a highly selective process, the CCC appropriated some elements of vocational training from the German Arbeitsdienst' (p. 259).

When war finally broke out, it accelerated and crystallized the process of internationalization that New Dealers had been tentatively pursuing. The state was bound to grow now; overseas commitments and engagements were increasingly an obvious necessity. Inasmuch as the building of a modern state apparatus adequate to the crisis of the times required this internationalization – often to the chagrin of American policymakers – the war did not so much undo as complete what happened in the 1930s. 'In retrospect, [the New Deal's] relief and welfare state mechanisms stood out, while its insulationist streak, its moves toward an activist managerial state, and its many contradictions started to fade. It was the war, in this sense, that actually *made* the New Deal' (p. 271).

Patel's contribution is largely in his mastery of many national historiographies and his ability to compare them. When he discusses the diffusion of punch card data management through public administrations around the world, for example, he gives a fascinating view of the development of parallel governmentalities in different national contexts. The book, however, is so full of evidence that its argument fades a bit. The reader learns a good deal, but does not necessarily see much in a new light. This in contrast to *The Great Exception*, which is provocative but draws on almost entirely familiar evidence. In the distance between the two books, a range of new questions to debate for years ahead emerges.

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