

Sammelrez: New Deal

Cowie, Jefferson: *The Great Exception. The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-69114-380-4; 288 S.

Patel, Kiran Klaus: *The New Deal. A Global History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-69114-912-7; 456 S.

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The New Deal – from an international perspective that term still evokes a number of ‘optimistic’ social policy associations, from taking decisive action in order to fight a grave economic crisis to investing in establishing long-time public welfare structures. Since the global financial crisis after 2007, numerous initiatives worldwide trusted in that ongoing appeal of the New Deal when announcing strategies for overcoming the Great Recession, although often their resemblance to the original was more or less in name only. In contrast to this observation, within the United States the New Deal seems to be much less positively charged in current political debates. Even Democratic candidates are usually rather reluctant to refer to the administration of president Franklin Roosevelt when outlining their social policy agenda. Here obviously the New Deal smells much too anti-individualistic to secure success at the polls, much too ‘socialist,’ much too ‘un-American.’

It is against that complex background that Princeton University Press published two very different scholarly treatments of the New Deal and its legacy. One is Kiran Klaus Patel’s global history, a broad survey placing the New Deal of the 1930s and after into a global setting stressing the multiple layers of transnational exchange between politicians, economists and other experts when confronted with the Great Depression; an exchange that included both (and often simultaneously) cooperation and adaption of ideas and strategies as well as confrontation and nationalistic insulation. The other is Jefferson Cowie’s strongly thesis-driven essay, a book that offers a historical explanation of the New Deal as much as it engages in dis-

cussing the current state of American social politics. Reading these two books together allows for combining two distinctly different, yet in many ways complementary perspectives.

Cowie’s essay „tends toward the interpretive rather than the exhaustive“ (p. 32), on about 220 pages of text he tenaciously argues in favor of his overall point that the New Deal years were in fact the Great Exception in U.S. history that the book’s title refers to, „a sustained deviation, an extended detour – from the main contours of American political practice, economic structure, and cultural outlook“ (p. 9). From Cowie’s point of view, this successful yet fragile development could only occur at that one particular moment in American history when the Great Depression demanded bold experimentation, when „out of the historic fault lines of American political culture – individualism, anti-statism, cultural conflicts, and racial and ethnic divisions – emerged the sociological foundation for a rare period of political unity that contrasted with much of American history“ (p. 7). After its promising start, Cowie argues, the New Deal shaped politics for decades to come, but it fell far short of any permanent transformation of capitalism and resulted in a current state of U.S. social policy considered an „American tragedy“ (p. 32).

For his analysis of the rise and fall of the New Deal order, Cowie structures his essay chronologically. In the first two chapters, he looks back at the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era and establishes the six touchpoints of argumentation that run throughout what follows: a) the state’s role in shaping social and economic policies; b) the importance of immigration (and its regulation); c) the influences of religion and cultural values; d) race relations and ethnic tension; e) aspects of working-class unity; and f) the ideology of American individualism. Chapters 3–5 chart the successes of the New Deal from its beginnings well into the 1960s while underlining ever again its many fault lines and compromises with regard to race, ethnicity, and gender. Chapter 6 deals with the period spanning from the 1970s to 1990s, describing the end of the New Deal order and the beginning of our neo-liberal present. Here, Cowie critically insists on his point that „there are many

reasons why this return to a new Gilded Age took the form it did, but we should be sure to count among them the profound fragility of New Deal liberalism itself“ (p. 206). In the concluding chapter, Cowie moves from historical analysis to political debate and offers his opinions about U.S. politics and political culture during the administration of president Barack Obama, leaving his readers with the twin message that on the one hand „despite the New Deal’s many flaws and fissures, [it] represents the best of what the United States can be as a nation – caring, sharing, secure, and occasionally visionary“ (p. 228), but on the other hand that it will never return as it was, because it remains forever inextricably bound to that specific historical moment during the 1930s which made its creation possible in the first place.

„The Great Exception“ should be read as a political essay more than as cutting-edge historical research. Within the current political climate of the United States, Cowie makes a strong point for historicizing the New Deal, for avoiding nostalgia and for stressing the importance of developing an up-to-date version of progressive social policy. At some points, both in his historical reading and his political agenda, Cowie in my opinion overemphasizes the progressive role of organized labor; his criticism towards new social movements as just expanding the individual rights tradition seems to be problematic and sometimes could even be understood as blaming them for the decline of the New Deal order. Moreover, his emphasize on the New Deal as only limited in time and fragile in character is less novel than he claims it to be, especially when taking an international point of view. At that point, Kiran Patel’s book serves as a valuable addition to Cowie’s interpretation.

His transnational history of the New Deal starts with acknowledging the Great Depression as „one of the most intense global moments in contemporary history“ (p. 1). From Patel’s point of view, any interpretation of the New Deal confined in terms of a nation-centered history must be misleading for three reasons: First, especially the early New Deal was explicitly created as some sort of national antidote to a crisis perceived as being

world-wide; second, the domestic focus of the New Deal was a variant within a set of related responses in other parts of the world, most of them resulting in stronger links between states and societies than before; and third, that all these different national solutions to the Great Depression were designed because politicians, experts and a wider public had a keen interest in how other countries dealt with the crisis, that countries „closely watched as well as learned from one another, however loath they were to admit it“ (p. 2).

In pursuing this transnational approach, Patel is clearly broadening our perspective in much the same way as did a generation of scholars before him who also avoided a national perspective but – turning toward another direction – chose a more local or regional focus instead. In his attempt to de-center Washington and relate the New Deal to transnational trends, events and actors, Patel is able to build his argumentation on a handful of scholars who followed similar paths before him (such as John Garraty, Daniel Rogers, Ian Tyrrell, Mary Nolan, and Ira Katznelson), and he also advocates opening conventional political history to cultural theory methods, to analyzing a broader set of transnational actors in their different attempt to govern (in the sense of Michel Foucault) societies during a period of economic and social crisis.

In chapter 1, Patel outlines his interpretation of the Great Depression as a truly global event that from early on triggered responses that resonated within transnational networks of politics, economics, and culture. Chapter 2 „zooms in on the early New Deal years“ (p. 8), it elaborates in detail on the Roosevelt administration’s emergency programs and links as well as compares them to reactions in many other countries worldwide. In chapter 3, Patel offers an interesting discussion about how the meaning of ‘global’ changed as a result of the transnational networks of observation, negotiation, exchange and rejection, before he continues chronologically and addresses the so called ‘second’ New Deal from 1935 onward in chapter 4. The final chapter then shows the longer-term effects of the New Deal in a different world after 1945 and discusses the relationship between the nation-centered politics of the 1930s and the United States’

greater willingness for open international engagement afterwards.

Two terms structure Patel's interpretation in particular. One is – maybe surprisingly in a global history as this – 'insulationism.' Although it reminds of isolationism, it proves to be much more sensitive to the complex situation especially of the early New Deal when politicians, experts, and the wider public strongly argued in favor of national responses to the crisis and national solutions while at the same time – consciously or not – were operating within a transnational frame of meanings, exchanges, entanglements, and transfers. As an analytical term, 'insulationism' works well to make sense of that mélange, and it also allows for integrating actors into the analysis who often drop out of political histories, such as artist or tourists. A second term that Patel uses systematically is security, or rather 'securitization of society,' especially in the second half of his book. Under that heading he discusses the New Deal's role in implementing longer-term programs that dealt with notions of uncertainty and risk within society and that were seeking for rationally planned ways of limiting potential social and economic dangers, including so seemingly different measures as introducing the Social Security Act and promoting the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Again, in carefully adopting elements of cultural theory, Patel enriches our understanding of the New Deal by broadening the frame of reference.

In general, this global history of the New Deal succeeds in its attempt to re-frame U.S. history of the 1930s and after in a transnational setting. Patel is particularly strong when dealing with matters of diplomacy and economics where he demonstrates a profound knowledge of both primary sources and secondary literature. His attempt to enrich conventional political and economic history by reaching out to cultural theory is very welcome, but unfortunately remains too limited and too episodic in my opinion. Although Patel certainly traces the outlines of a transnational cultural history of the New Deal and tries to integrate them into his narrative, he cannot really highlight the manifold complex and often contradictory actions and responses of non-experts, non-elites, marginalized ac-

tors and cultural artifacts that were also part of that story.

Taken together, the two books strongly underline the ongoing relevance of the New Deal for the 21st century. When treated carefully and with historical sensitivity – and not nostalgically or as some simplistic battle cry – it still offers helpful food for thought in contemporary debates, both scholarly and political.

HistLit 2017-1-091 / Olaf Stieglitz über Cowie, Jefferson: *The Great Exception. The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*. Princeton 2016, in: H-Soz-Kult 07.02.2017.

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