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The New Deal Order

JASON SCOTT SMITH

This essay explores how historians and others have used the concept of political economy, arguing that its application to United States history between the 1920s and 1940s helps to clarify the relationships between politics, the economy, and liberalism.

Our present moment is bearing witness to the return of political economy as a useful category of analysis. In this essay, I outline this intellectual reorientation and explore how the interpretive lens of political economy can be applied to United States history between the 1920s and 1940s, focusing on the relationships between politics, the economy, and liberalism. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the intellectual costs and benefits of this concept for the practice of history.

While political economy is in the midst of a revival, it is decidedly not a new concept. The phrase first appeared in Antoine de Montchrétien's 1615 work, *Traicté de l'oeconomie politique*, a text designed to encourage careful thinking about the relationships between society, the state, and the economy.¹ Over the eighteenth and nineteenth century the concept took hold more fully, as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx, and others refined and elaborated upon it in their work. Political economy came to refer to "the management of the economic affairs of the state," and this connection—between the state and the market—is at the core of how the concept has generally been used.²

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1. Teichgraeber III, preface to Dunn, ed., *Economic Limits*, vii; and see also Smith, "Reintroduction to Political Economy."

2. Caporaso and Levine, *Theories of Political Economy*, 1; Bernstein, "How Economics Became What it Is"; Solow, "How Did Economics Get That Way";

Recent work in political economy reflects a growing interest in the overlapping histories of law, institutions, policy-making, business, labor, and economic development, among other subjects. For example, Jennifer Klein has excavated the private sector's commitment to health, pensions, and welfare. Julian Zelizer has stressed the long-standing difficulties involved in taxing the public. David Moss has chronicled how the American regulatory state has intervened to reallocate risk. Jacob Hacker has explored the public and private divisions in the welfare state. Meg Jacobs and Lizabeth Cohen have studied how consumers mobilized to reshape the broader polity. Judith Stein and Thomas Sugrue have unpacked the impact that Fordism's collapse had on workers' lives. Alice O'Connor has argued that intellectual frameworks have profoundly shaped how we have thought about the problem of poverty. Andrew Cohen has investigated how workers have struggled to use the legal system to counter the power wielded by their employers. And, most recently, Jessica Wang has clarified how law and ideas intersected to stimulate the regulation of the stock market. These scholars, as well as many others, have directly engaged the larger problem of charting the relationship between society, the state, and the market. More broadly, this emerging political economy synthesis speaks to the concerns of historians like Thomas Bender, as well as political scientists such as Peter Hall and David Soskice, who are interested in situating historical topics in a transnational or global context.³

This very partial recounting of recent scholarship indicates that there are a great many people at work exploring the connections between institutions and power relationships that have, in turn, shaped the state and the market over time. Given this emerging intellectual shift, I want to examine what it might mean to reinterpret what Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle memorably called the "New Deal order."⁴ We can, I argue, learn a great deal about the New Deal state and American liberalism in doing so. Of course, the Great Depression and the New Deal have not lacked for historical attention, and several clas-

Lamoreaux, "Economic History and the Cliometric Revolution"; Heilbroner, *Worldly Philosophers*; Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*; and see also Mirowski, *More Heat than Light*.

3. On the intersection of state and market in nineteenth-century U.S. history, see John, "Farewell to the 'Party Period'"; and on the emergence of a "political economy synthesis," see John, "Ruling Passions." Klein, *For All These Rights*; Zelizer, "Uneasy Relationship"; Moss, *When All Else Fails*; Hacker, *Divided Welfare State*; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*; Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*; Stein, *Running Steel*; Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*; O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*; Cohen, *Racketeer's Progress*; Wang, "Imagining the Administrative State"; Bender, *Nation Among Nations*; Hall and Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism*.

4. Introduction in Fraser and Gerstle, eds., *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*.

sic and recent works have focused on aspects of political economy in interpreting this turbulent moment. Fraser and Gerstle's collection of essays, for example, presented a largely pessimistic appraisal of the New Deal's failure to survive the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Ellis Hawley argued that tracing the shifting ambivalence of reformers on the question of economic concentration in society provided a way to understand the New Deal as a politically coherent undertaking. Mark Leff, in his study of taxation during the 1930s, observed that the New Deal's commitment to a regressive system of taxation, coupled with largely empty rhetoric about "soaking the rich," alerted us to what he termed "the limits of symbolic reform." In much of his work, Alan Brinkley has focused our attention on the limits to the New Deal's commitment to structurally reforming the economy, emphasizing how reformers fell prey to the seductive attractions of Keynesian demand management. More recently, historians like Meg Jacobs and Lizabeth Cohen have restored questions about consumption to interpretations of this period, attending to the role played by mass culture and arguing that reformers undertook a number of state-building efforts organized around issues important to consumers. Moreover, as a number of historians have observed, the Great Depression and World War II witnessed several key developments in America's political economy: the rise of organized labor, the creation of social security, and the first steps toward creating a more robust social safety net—steps that would resonate throughout the postwar years.⁵

For all the attention that has been paid to these subjects, though, many historians have overlooked a revolution in the *priorities* of the American state that took place during the Great Depression, a revolution that radically transformed the physical landscape, political system, and economy of the United States. We can begin to recover the scope of this transformation by looking directly at how the New Deal state spent its money.⁶ On average, between 1933 and 1939 over two-thirds of federal emergency expenditures went toward

5. Fraser and Gerstle, *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*; Hawley, *New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly*; Leff, *Limits of Symbolic Reform*; Brinkley, *End of Reform*; and see also Brinkley, "Transformation of New Deal Liberalism"; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*; Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*; Stebenne, "Postwar 'New Deal'"; Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*; Berkowitz, ed., *Social Security after Fifty*; and Amenta, *Bold Relief*.

6. In doing this, I follow the advice of economist Joseph Schumpeter. In his classic essay, "The Crisis of the Tax State," Schumpeter, borrowing the insights of sociologist Rudolf Goldscheid, declared, "The budget is the skeleton of the state, stripped of all misleading ideologies." Schumpeter, "Crisis of the Tax State," and Goldscheid, "Sociological Approach to Problems of Public Finance." This and following paragraphs draw on Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*.

funding public works programs.⁷ These dollars were allocated to new agencies, such as the Public Works Administration (PWA), and later the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The PWA, created in 1933, received an initial appropriation of \$3.3 billion, which it mainly applied to heavy construction and large-scale building. To put this figure in context, this amount was just over 165 percent of the federal government's revenues in 1933, or 5.9 percent of the 1933 U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). Relying on private contractors, the PWA deployed its funds in all but three of the nation's 3,071 counties, while helping to pay for projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority and Boulder Dam. Created in 1935, the WPA did lighter construction work and strove to avoid private contracting. Its initial appropriation of \$4.88 billion was about 135 percent of the federal government's revenues in 1935, or about 6.7 percent of GDP in that year. Although primarily intended as a vast relief effort for employing the unskilled, the WPA built an impressive range of projects, including over 480 airports, 78,000 bridges, and nearly 40,000 public buildings. Both programs were the beneficiaries of the federal government's commitment to construction. During these years, the payrolls of the PWA and the WPA were among the largest in the nation, easily dwarfing those of the largest private enterprises. In carrying out their mandates, the two programs integrated a multitude of municipal construction experts, members of the Army Corps of Engineers, and civil engineers into the national state.⁸

By using the lens of political economy to focus on the New Deal's public works spending, we can begin to see the outlines of a different interpretation. The huge amount of funds devoted to public construction, the far-reaching federal efforts invested in directing this money, and the long-run impact of the infrastructure itself form the components of the story of a public works revolution.⁹ This revolution helped justify the new role of the federal government in American life, legitimizing—intellectually and physically—what has come to be known as Keynesian management of the economy. By sponsoring this infrastructure, New Dealers remade the built environment that managed the movement of people, goods, electricity, water, and

7. I have calculated this figure using Budget of the United States Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1940, esp. vii; Budget of the United States Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1941, esp. xxi–xxii. Between 1933 and 1939, emergency spending averaged about 50 percent of all federal expenditures.

8. Roger Daniels, "Public Works in the 1930s," 5; and Amenta, *Bold Relief*.

9. To be sure, this revolution in priorities is one episode in a longer history of pre- and post-New Deal federal spending on public works. See, for example, Armstrong, ed., *History of Public Works*; Larson, *Internal Improvement*; and Fishman, ed., *American Planning Tradition*.

waste. Among the New Deal's projects were some of the largest and most significant structures ever built in human history.¹⁰

These programs not only anticipated the national highways and the military-industrial complex; in the postwar period government-sponsored economic development also looked abroad. For example, Harry Truman's Point IV program was conceived of as an international PWA, building roads and airports in countries like Afghanistan and Vietnam. Similarly, Lyndon Johnson's vision of exporting Keynesian-style economic development to Southeast Asia by replicating the Tennessee Valley Authority on the Mekong Delta reflected the powerful example set by the New Deal. After World War II, construction firms like Bechtel and Brown & Root (today a subsidiary of Halliburton) took their expertise overseas as well.

The New Deal's public works programs employed millions of unemployed workers, both urban and rural, while building the infrastructure that helped integrate the disparate regions of the country into a national market. From the beginning, then, New Dealers built a state that was both far more powerful and substantially less liberal than historians have realized: more powerful, in the scale and scope of the federal government's commitment to economic development, and less liberal, in the sense that the New Deal state was focused on state-sponsored economic development, and not, in contrast, centrally occupied with tasks like implementing its social security program (which began making payments only in 1942), or with more radical goals, such as the direct redistribution of wealth through tax policy. By reinterpreting the New Deal in this way through a political economic lens, we gain a new history of just how the New Deal's public works programs contributed to American economic development.

Public works also had important ramifications for state building and political party building at the federal, state, and local levels. Harry Hopkins, the head of the WPA, once claimed that the New Deal was a political project that could "tax and tax, spend and spend, and elect and elect." We now know this phrase's descendant, the derivative expression "tax and spend liberalism," but at the time Hopkins made his statement it was pure genius—he succinctly identified the qualities that made New Deal liberalism so powerful and controversial: The taxing and spending functions of government could—and

10. Economic historians have done a lot of work on problems of public spending at the federal, state, and local levels during the New Deal, but they generally draw a distinction—unwarranted, in my view—between spending on "public works" done by the PWA and "work relief" performed by the WPA, neglecting the fact that both efforts built substantial infrastructure throughout the nation. For an excellent review of this literature, see Wallis, "Political Economy of New Deal Spending"; see also Wallis and Oates, "Impact of the New Deal on American Federalism"; Brown, "Fiscal Policy in the 'Thirties: A Reappraisal."

did—remake the physical landscape of the nation. Even more striking, though, was that through using the taxing and spending powers of the state, New Dealers were able to remake a society's politics.¹¹ These accomplishments raise a central question: how do we evaluate New Deal liberalism when we attend to its political economy and place its public works programs at its core?

The New Deal's public works programs reflect a number of achievements and shortcomings. These programs built the infrastructure that made a national market more efficient, spurred dramatic advances in economic productivity, created a network of roads and airports, planned for national highways, improved military bases, foreshadowed the rise of the Sunbelt, and gave the New Dealers a policy tool that could be used to shape overseas development, from the Cold War through the Vietnam War. Faced with the Great Depression, the New Deal and its public works projects helped save capitalism, an achievement subsequently consolidated by enormous public spending during World War II and the ensuing postwar economic boom.¹²

Bound up with these triumphs, however, were many limitations. Most notable, of course, was the failure of the public works programs to bring an end to mass unemployment during the Great Depression. Those that the New Deal did manage to employ were white men, for the most part. This was hardly surprising, given their disproportionate presence in the building trades and construction industry, generally. Surely, the New Deal had a remarkable chance to address the crisis of unemployment among African-Americans and women. Yet, in basing so much of their public policy on the building of public works projects, New Dealers largely reinforced the gender and racial boundaries already evident in the labor market, bypassing the maternalist legacies of Progressive Era social policy.¹³

When we turn to the environment, the New Deal's shortcomings are likewise apparent. While architectural historians have generally

11. The New Deal's public works programs were great sources of controversy. For example, a 1939 Gallup opinion poll found that Americans ranked the WPA both as Franklin Roosevelt's "greatest accomplishment" and as the "worst thing the Roosevelt administration has done." Howard, *WPA and Federal Relief Policy*, 105.

12. Schulman, *Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*; Miller and Pozetta, eds., *Shades of the Sunbelt*; Markusen, et al., *Rise of the Gunbelt*; Schwarz, *New Dealers*; Field, "The Most Technologically Progressive Decade." For an unintended consequence of the New Deal's success in saving capitalism, see Lind, "Conservative Elites and the Counterrevolution."

13. Mettler, *Dividing Citizens*; Rose, *Workfare or Fair Work*; Quadagno, "From Old-Age Assistance to Supplemental Security Income"; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*. For an example of how the New Deal had a positive impact on African-Americans in the South, however, see Jones, *Tribe of Black Ulysses*.

praised the New Deal for creating a more democratic landscape, environmental historians have strongly disagreed. From their perspective, the New Deal spent far too much money on roads and not enough on developing alternative mass transportation technologies. They charge that the New Deal's large hydroelectric projects promoted an imperialist view of resources, leaving nature to be exploited by a coercive, undemocratic power elite composed of technically minded engineers and narrow-minded bureaucrats. Developments such as the TVA displaced thousands of people, while the affordable electrical power generated by dams led only to increased pollution. The main achievement of the New Deal, in this view, is its role in creating an "asphalt nation." To be sure, the environmental damage caused by the New Deal's public works projects was real, if difficult to measure. But to blame New Dealers such as Harry Hopkins for not being mindful of the environment is to fail to recognize the historical impact of the New Deal's public works projects.¹⁴

Indeed, in setting out to preserve capitalism in the face of the Great Depression, New Dealers turned to what they knew. They experimented with their various policy measures, strengthened federal power to boost the standing of labor and consumers vis á vis business, and regulated the nation's labor and financial markets to address the greatest economic crisis of the twentieth century. Environmental shortsightedness on their part should be viewed within this broader context: despite deficiencies, the New Deal kept the United States from embracing undemocratic political philosophies such as fascism or communism. Through its public works projects, the federal government justified its new presence in the nation's economy. The New Dealers compellingly demonstrated—in almost every county of the nation—that public investment and state-sponsored economic development were essential to a modern society, not only for surviving the Great Depression, but especially for laying the foundations for a subsequent period of postwar economic growth and sustained productivity rarely equaled in world history. Labeling the trajectory of New Deal liberalism as a narrative of declension leading to the "end of reform," as a journey away from the 1933 statist intervention of the National Recovery Administration's industrial codes to the manipulation of fiscal policy in 1937 and 1938, misses the central significance of the

14. Cutler, *Public Landscape of the New Deal*; Ghirardo, *Building New Communities*; Craig, *Federal Presence*; Leighninger Jr., *Long-Range Public Investment*; Steinberg, *Down to Earth*; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*. For an argument that the New Deal advanced the cause of conservation, though, see Maher, "New Deal Body Politic"; and for an insightful assessment of the New Deal and the environment that builds on Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, see Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*.

New Deal's commitment to public works throughout these years and afterward. By using the interpretive lens of political economy, we can comprehend more fully the New Deal's long-lasting achievements in using public investment to spur economic development during and after the 1930s. Indeed, the "mixed economy" constructed by the New Deal—with its public investment, its regulation of banking and capital markets, and its recognition of organized labor's right to bargain collectively—soon helped to foster tremendous economic growth (between 1940 and 1973 American GDP grew, in real terms, at an average annual per capita rate of 3 percent).¹⁵

While using the concept of political economy in this fashion can aid in providing a more complete understanding of the New Deal order, it also has broader uses. More generally, attending to political economy—to the deeper relationships of power, inscribed in institutions and organizations—presents historians with an opportunity to advance a broader rethinking of political history that a variety of scholars have endorsed.¹⁶ Indeed, three eminent social and intellectual historians recently joined this movement; emphatically agreeing that what the profession needs, put simply, is a renewed focus on political history and political economy.¹⁷

In sum, with so many US historians embarked upon taking a political turn in their work, it seems the concept of political economy can help us in asking significant questions about the concrete institutions, social practices, labor relations, and policy regimes that have helped to shape economy and society over time. The past thirty years have witnessed the intellectual disaggregating of "the state," an effort led by sociologists, historians, and political scientists; we now need to deploy this insight into disaggregating "the market," understanding it not only as an economic institution, but also as one shaped by politics and society.¹⁸ (The New Deal is a particularly important period for this undertaking, representing as it does a period of state building taken up in direct response to the enormous market failures exposed by the Great Depression.) Business historians, who have long understood the importance of situating the activities of firms in broader networks of power, are well suited to be key players in advancing this project.

15. McCraw, "New Deal and the Mixed Economy"; Stebenne, "Postwar 'New Deal.'"

16. Shafer and Badger, eds. *Contesting Democracy*; Jacobs, Novak, and Zelizer, eds., *Democratic Experiment*; Leff, "Revisioning U.S. Political History"; and Lukes, *Power*.

17. See the observations of Mary Ryan, Drew Faust, and David Hollinger, in "Interchange: The Practice of History," 609–611.

18. Coronil, "Smelling Like a Market."

Given this essay's largely optimistic picture of what there is to gain from embracing the concept of political economy, it's worth pausing to ask if there are costs to adopting this approach? In a limited sense, the answer to this question must necessarily be "yes." Different approaches to studying the past come into existence because, by definition, they provide alternative modes for addressing specific questions, or areas of inquiry, that had been ignored by previous approaches. In performing this intellectual work of reframing history, newer subfields are generally not engaged with asking the same sets of questions posed by older ways of organizing knowledge. To the extent that historians working on issues of political economy are no longer asking the same questions that used to occupy the "new" social or cultural historians, then, there is by definition a cost to this shift in emphasis.

At this level of discussion, though, what really seems to be at stake between political economy on the one hand, and older, more entrenched ways of practicing history on the other, is less a question of intellectual costs and benefits and more a recapitulation of a classic tension: "structure" versus "agency." Political economy, for many of the scholars mentioned in this essay, is a concept that aids in investigating questions about structures—legal, political, institutional, economic—and treats the agency of ordinary people mainly when they are acting within these structures, as lawmakers, organized workers, or contractors, for example.¹⁹ But it would be a mistake, I think, simply to split the difference in this fashion.

Rather, if we are to attempt to address this seeming dichotomy between structure and agency in a productive way, scholars on either side of this issue might benefit from considering how historian William Sewell has handled it. Indeed, Sewell's own intellectual trajectory, encompassing history, anthropology, political science, and sociology, is itself instructive in this regard. Rather than viewing structure and agency in an unchanging, static opposition, Sewell argues that we instead recognize that "enactments of structures imply a particular concept of agency—one that sees agency not as opposed to, but as constituent of, structure." Structures, Sewell observes, "empower agents differentially, which also implies that they embody the desires, intentions, and knowledge of agents differentially as well. Structures, and the human agencies they endow, are laden with differences in power."²⁰ In the spirit of Sewell's formulation, then, historians interested in political economy might draw upon the earlier achievements

19. For a recent and quite thoughtful consideration of "structure," see Galambos, "Recasting the Organizational Synthesis."

20. Sewell, "Theory of Structure," 143, 145.

of the new social and cultural history in order to ground these studies in larger networks of power. Similarly, new social and cultural historians might well find useful the insights provided by this “new” political economy, which reveal how deeper relationships of power have changed over time. In this way, I would propose, the emerging move toward political economy, with the potential it holds for connecting long-popular questions of agency to long-neglected questions concerning structures, and with its insights into understanding how differing power relationships have shaped institutions, politics, and history, can help to significantly advance our understandings of the historical, political, and institutional origins of our present moment.

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