

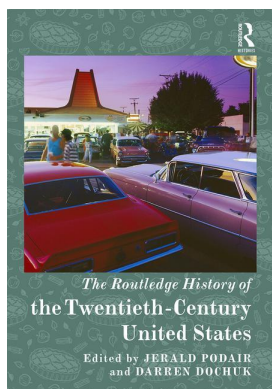
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### **The Great Depression and New Deal—A Historiographical Survey**

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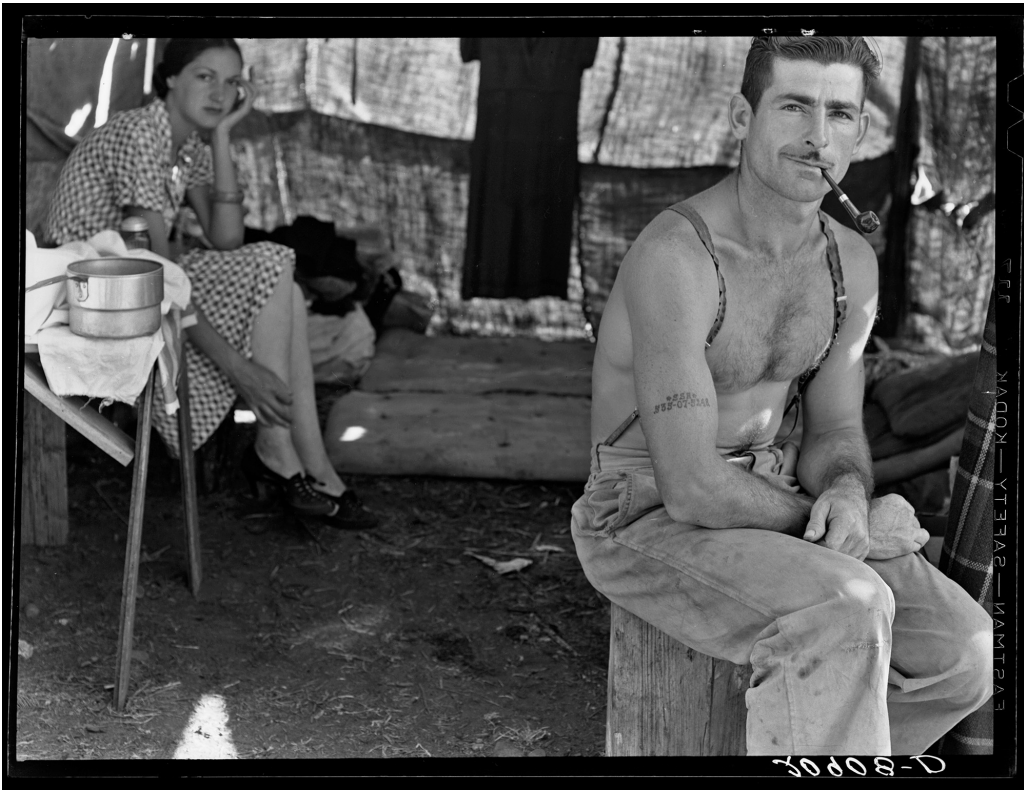
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### 3

# THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND NEW DEAL—A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

*Mason B. Williams*



*Figure 3.1* Unemployed lumber worker goes with his wife to the bean harvest, August 1939. Dorothea Lange, photographer. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-fsa-8b15572.

“The Depression froze small towns,” the American writer John Updike recalled. “Then the war came along and froze them additionally.” As the war drew to a close, Updike remembered, many Americans were living in “a world that hadn’t changed in fifteen years.” Or so it looked to a child growing up in the 1930s outside of Reading, Pennsylvania. To Americans who were older when the economic catastrophe hit, things looked decidedly different: The changes of the 1930s seemed little short of revolutionary. Updike’s own father had lost his job as a telephone lineman around the time of his son’s birth in 1932; he made it through the Depression working regular stints for the Works Progress Administration. Like many small-town Protestants, Wesley Updike had been raised a Republican. But in the mid-1930s he switched his allegiance to FDR’s Democratic Party. “His memory of being abandoned by society and big business never left him,” his son wrote. While John Updike was growing up in the apparently tranquil landscape of small-town Pennsylvania, the world was changing fundamentally for people like Wesley Updike.<sup>1</sup>

Americans in the 1930s knew themselves to be living through extraordinary times. “The certain landmarks are gone,” Walter Lippman declared. “The fixed points by which our fathers steered the ship of state have vanished.”<sup>2</sup> Haltingly, Americans would steer themselves out of the economic abyss, and in the process establish new landmarks, new points of reference. In so doing, they would rebuild the American state, giving it new powers and responsibilities; reshape the American economy; and forever alter the relationship between the federal government and the American people.

For many years, the Great Depression and the New Deal have appeared as watershed moments in American life. Little wonder, then, that historians have returned to the 1930s more often than to any other period in twentieth-century America. For students of the American economy, the Great Depression still represents (as Depression scholar and former Treasury Secretary Ben Bernanke has put it) the “holy grail” of macroeconomics.<sup>3</sup> For historians, the New Deal is “the most painted political landscape of twentieth-century America,” a key to understanding “the origins of our time.”<sup>4</sup> Despite its familiarity, scholars in the twenty-first century continue to look to the 1930s to understand key features of twentieth-century American history. With some important exceptions, our understanding of the economic history of the 1930s remains largely unchanged—though it is quite different from the version many students learn. New Deal scholarship, in the meantime, is changing dramatically, perhaps more so than in any previous moment. Though even most professional historians are not yet aware of it, recent scholarship has laid the groundwork for a fundamentally new approach to the New Deal.

## The Great Depression

Manias, panics and busts have been a feature of American life since the dawn of the republic. Deep and sometimes prolonged recessions wracked the United States at regular intervals from the War of 1812 on, growing increasingly severe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet the Great Depression of the 1930s stands alone in its duration and the extent of human misery it left in its wake. It also stands apart for its consequences: it inspired a policy response that forever changed how the United States governs its economy.

This spectacular economic collapse raises some fundamental questions. What caused it? Why was it so big? And why did it last so long? For many years, historians outside the field of economic history told a story similar to the one Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., related in his seminal trilogy, *The Age of Roosevelt*—a version of which still appears in some textbooks.<sup>5</sup> In this story, the 1920s saw tremendous growth, but also great inequality. When the stock-market bubble burst, the era of prosperity came to an end; as workers lacked the purchasing power to buy the products of American industry and agriculture, a deflationary cycle set in. The U.S. government responded by raising tariff rates—the infamous Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930—which only further sunk the economy into depression. Countercyclical spending produced a mild recovery in Franklin

Roosevelt's first term, but then the federal government, unwisely judging itself out of the woods, cut back its expenditures in early 1937, leading to the "Roosevelt Recession" of 1937–38. Only with World War II, and massive government spending required by the war effort, did the Great Depression finally come to a close.

Today, economic historians and economists would contest practically every detail of this account. The upward redistribution of income and wealth in the 1920s, they note, was not large enough in scale to account for the gigantic drop in consumption of the Depression years. The stock market crash did not in itself cause the depression, they argue, though it did help to propagate it. The Smoot-Hawley tariff did not help, but falling exports produced by retaliatory tariffs represented only a small part of overall GNP decline. The unintended federal stimulus supplied by New Deal relief programs and the payment of a veterans' bonus in the mid-1930s was undercut by fiscal austerity at the state and local levels. And yet recovery occurred anyway—to the point where the American economy might well have achieved a complete recovery even without the boom in government spending occasioned by World War II.

Most scholars now treat the Great Depression, not as a discrete event that begins in the United States in 1929, but rather as part of a broader crisis of global capitalism that began with World War I. The destruction wrought by that conflict destabilized the world economy, leaving an overhang of debt that depended upon continued American lending. Unwisely, the major nations chose to reestablish the prewar system of international monetary exchange, the gold standard, thereby locking in imbalances in the global economy that might have readjusted under a more flexible system.<sup>6</sup> Most economists trace the onset of the American recession in 1929 to the Federal Reserve's decision to stem a speculative bubble in securities by tightening monetary policy, which led to slumps in construction and the auto industry.<sup>7</sup> The October 1929 stock market crash, notes the economist Christina Romer, not only wiped out paper wealth, but also generated extraordinary uncertainty on the part of consumers and investors; as the slide continued unabated, uncertainty turned to pessimism, making consumers even less likely to buy and businessmen even less likely to borrow.<sup>8</sup> Ben Bernanke has noted that the bank failures of 1930–31 made it much more difficult for households, farmers and small businesses to find credit—further feeding the deflationary spiral.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to the causes of the recovery, scholars are broadly in agreement: the Great Depression came to an end because the United States finally abandoned the gold standard, and because the Roosevelt administration consciously chose a policy of monetary reflation.<sup>10</sup> Nearly all economists and historians agree with Barry Eichengreen and Jeffrey Sachs's seminal finding that the decision to abandon the gold standard (which the United States did in stages between 1933 and 1934) represented a vital step toward recovery.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter, American recovery was spurred by a policy of devaluation and reflation; it was also aided by gold inflows from Europe, as investors skittish over political unrest sought more secure American investments.

Recently, historians of economic growth have added another dimension to our understanding of the American economy in the 1930s, showing, remarkably, that the years 1929–1941 were among the most technologically progressive in American history. Alexander Field has demonstrated that, although labor and capital inputs remained basically stable, output rose by between 30 and 40 percent. The American economy had made huge gains in productivity, thanks in large measure to public infrastructure spending—especially road building—and a large increase in corporate spending on research and development. Depression-era advances, Field argues, laid the foundations for the remarkable period of prosperity that followed World War II.<sup>12</sup>

The historical literature on daily life in the Depression decade is extraordinarily diverse. One important body of literature, following in the footsteps of George Chauncey's classic *Gay New York*, examines the intersecting politics of gender, sexuality and race in interwar cities. Chap Heap, for instance, has uncovered the role of "slumming"—voyeuristic visits by middle-class people to working-class and non-white commercial leisure spaces—in shaping popular conceptions of sexuality, race

and urban space.<sup>13</sup> Another rich body of literature examines African American community formation in the urban North in the era of the Great Migration and the New Negro movement. Victoria Wolcott has challenged the traditional focus on male industrial workers, bringing to light the “quotidian details” of African American women’s lives in interwar Detroit and tracing the gendered transformation of community discourse in the 1930s from one of “bourgeois respectability” to a “more masculine ideology of self-determination.”<sup>14</sup> Davarian Baldwin has highlighted the role black cultural industries such as beauty culture, sports and cinema played in shaping a working-class “marketplace of intellectual life” in interwar Chicago.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps especially influential has been the impact of the “long civil rights movement” framework, which has recast the 1930s as a key passage in the Black Freedom Struggle. Following in the footsteps of Robin Kelley, Patricia Sullivan and others, Glenda Gilmore has delineated the challenge posed to Jim Crow by a movement of radicals, workers, social-gospel preachers and newspaper editors that began to emerge during World War I and reached its high-water mark in the late 1930s and into World War II. This radical movement was suppressed during the Cold War, Gilmore argues, but not before it had helped recast Jim Crow as “fundamentally un-American,” thereby laying the groundwork for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>16</sup>

### The New Deal

By producing one-party control of the national government, inducing an atmosphere of emergency and casting into doubt old ideas about the self-correcting capacity of the economy and the proper role of the federal government, the Great Depression created the opening for one of the most remarkable bursts of policymaking in American history. In the space of a few years, the Democratic Congress enacted, and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration put into operation, a wide range of programs aimed, not only at the immediate goal of economic recovery, but also at reshaping American capitalism to make it more equitable and secure. These programs included new regulations of finance and industry, agricultural price supports, expanded rights to collective bargaining, emergency and categorical poor relief, unemployment and old-age insurance programs, conservation measures and large public works and economic development projects.

For many years, historians framed the New Deal as the set of policies and programs created during the first six years of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency—beginning with the burst of lawmaking that became known as the “Hundred Days” (March–June, 1933) and ending with the enactment of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. Focusing heavily on Roosevelt’s White House and cabinet, they sought to characterize the New Deal and place it within the history of American politics. They sought to uncover its intellectual sources, particularly its connections to progressive reform and the experience of World War I. They plumbed its relationship to American capitalism, asking whether it ushered in a mixed economy or a form of “corporate liberalism.” They examined the limits of New Deal reform and identified the reasons why the New Dealers were not able to achieve more. Debating these topics from a variety of perspectives, historians and social scientists produced a greater volume of scholarship on the New Deal than on any other topic in twentieth-century U.S. history.<sup>17</sup>

The ascent of the Reagan coalition in the 1980s cast the New Deal in a new light. Rather than a short cycle of reform or an epochal watershed that set the terms for all subsequent American politics, historians now framed their subject as “the New Deal order”: a “dominant order of ideas, public policies, and political alliances,” as Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle put it in a seminal collection of essays, that “decidedly shaped American political life” from the 1930s into the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Going beyond a narrow focus on the Roosevelt administration, scholars working in the 1980s developed a far more nuanced account of the coalition of interests and actors that came together to support the New Deal—and the “missed opportunities, unintended consequences, and dangerous but inescapable compromises” that ultimately led the New Deal order to disintegrate.<sup>19</sup> Drawing questions and methods

from social history, they traced the “attitudinal changes” that led “white ethnic” and African American workers to support the New Deal and the Democratic Party, and to look to Washington and to labor unions as sources of well-being.<sup>20</sup> They looked closely at how the ideas and interests of labor unions, intellectuals and key sectors of industry came to align in support of New Deal programs.<sup>21</sup> They charted how New Deal liberalism changed in Roosevelt’s second and third terms, gradually shedding its interests in planning and antimonopolism to embrace a less interventionist blend of fiscal policy and social welfare.<sup>22</sup> And they called greater attention to racial exclusion, though they did not yet place it at the center of their accounts—this would happen only with seminal research on postwar urban liberalism in the 1990s.

Some scholars continue to revisit the perennial questions of New Deal scholarship, shedding new light on topics that have long been at or near the center of the literature. One body of literature focuses on the New Deal and the labor movement—long a vital area of research. Andrew Cohen has restored craft workers to a narrative that has tended to focus on mass production industry; longstanding practices within the least modernized sectors of the American industrial economy, he argued, formed the precedents of New Deal labor policy.<sup>23</sup> Robert Korstad has documented the Wagner Act’s role in the development of labor-based civil rights politics among tobacco workers in urban North Carolina.<sup>24</sup> Zaragosa Vargas has noted that the early New Deal inspired Mexican American farmworkers to organize—but that the exclusion of agricultural workers from key New Deal legislation represented “a death blow for the Mexican American working classes.” Indeed, while the national government was helping industrial unions win recognition, agencies such as the INS and the Border Patrol were actively repressing Mexican American worker militancy.<sup>25</sup> Ahmed White has issued a revisionist account of the Little Steel strike of 1937, arguing that the Roosevelt administration’s lukewarm support for the National Labor Relations Board allowed employers to “redouble their resistance” to unionization, setting back the CIO’s organizing efforts.<sup>26</sup> The political scientist Daniel Schlozman has explained why labor was able to become a major force within a major political party when other, comparable social movements have failed.<sup>27</sup> Eric Schickler has documented the CIO’s role in leading the Democratic Party to embrace civil rights, which much of the party would do by the 1940s—setting in motion the partisan realignment that would come to full fruition in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>28</sup>

If historians continue to revisit some classic questions, the rise of new approaches within the field of twentieth-century U.S. history has allowed historians to take a fresh look at the New Deal—calling attention to some previously neglected areas and placing familiar ones in a new light. The resulting research has been eclectic, but some patterns emerge. First, it emphasizes the degree to which the New Deal built upon existing structures and patterns rather than breaking entirely from them. Second, it treats the American state as more capable than previous assumed: Rather than an underdeveloped state, scholars now see the New Deal state as competent yet segmented and divided, favoring some groups over others. Third (and related), it has moved race and racism, finally, to the center of the New Deal story. Fourth, it has treated the New Deal as a phenomenon that transcends “the national,” looking far more closely at transnational and regional/local developments than the traditionally Washington-centered story. Fifth, it has proposed a plural chronology. Rather than treat the New Deal as a six-year burst of reform or a decades-long order, scholars have depicted it as a phase in a longer epoch of transatlantic social politics, an episode in the remaking of Jim Crow, a “long New Deal” stretching from 1933 to 1952, a “great exception” in American culture and society running from the 1920s into the 1960s—and many more. In making peace with the multiplicity of political time, the literature has surrendered some of the coherence that used to mark the New Deal literature. But it has opened up a far broader understanding of the New Deal’s impact on American life.

The concept of consumption figured heavily in the scholarship of the 1980s and early 1990s, underpinning the seminal work of Alan Brinkley and Lizabeth Cohen, among many others. Beginning in the early 2000s, scholars put consumer politics itself at the center of the New Deal

story. Major studies by Landon Storrs,<sup>29</sup> Cohen,<sup>30</sup> Meg Jacobs<sup>31</sup> and Lawrence Glickman<sup>32</sup> have shown how a left-consumerist politics of consumers' leagues, labor unions and grassroots activists shaped the New Deal policy agenda, providing support for higher labor standards as well as mass purchasing power.

Historians' search for the roots of modern conservatism, a major line of inquiry since the early 2000s, has led several scholars back into the 1930s, when opposition to the New Deal and the growth of the regulatory state catalyzed new conservative organizations and political styles. Kim Phillips-Fein has detailed the efforts of businessmen and their allies to organize in opposition to the New Deal and to promote free-market ideals.<sup>33</sup> Kevin Kruse has argued that the marriage of Christianity, patriotism and conservative politics in postwar America, commonly ascribed to the influence of the Cold War, was actually the fruit of strategic efforts by leading businessmen to push back against liberal economic policy.<sup>34</sup> Kathryn S. Olmsted has located the origins of conservative politics in California in agricultural businessmen's response to labor mobilization in the mid-1930s.<sup>35</sup> Jason Morgan Ward has charted the emergence in the 1930s of a pro-segregation political movement forged in opposition to measures such as the federal anti-lynching bill.<sup>36</sup>

Ironically, many of these conservative movements flourished in Sunbelt and suburban communities that New Deal spending helped to create. A rich vein of research within the fields of urban/metropolitan history, focused on the impact of the Federal Housing Administration upon American community formation and racial segregation, helps us to make sense of this apparent paradox. Following Kenneth T. Jackson's classic work, scholars such as Craig Steven Wilder<sup>37</sup> and David Freund<sup>38</sup> have documented the history of redlining and the ways in which the FHA's support of mortgage lending facilitated segregated metropolitan development. Becky Nicolaidis's history of the Los Angeles industrial suburb of South Gate has shown how FHA and Veterans Administration mortgage programs helped remake the culture and politics of suburbia.<sup>39</sup> N.D.B. Connolly has examined how federal money helped local officials in Miami to "improve and modernize Jim Crow's built environment."<sup>40</sup> Taken together, these studies have shown how many upwardly mobile white Americans understood the New Deal's largesse as the earned rewards for hard work and property ownership, naturalizing racial privilege in a way that militated against integration and more generous social policy.

Perhaps no turn in historiography has had as great an impact on New Deal scholarship as the rise of "the state" as a site of historical inquiry. As American political development and historical institutionalism have reshaped American political history, scholars have shifted their focus away from discrete programs and policies and toward the question of how the American state governed in particular areas: How the New Deal state was built, why authority came to be configured the way it was, and with what consequences. Much of this research has focused on the distinctive characteristics of the American welfare state. Whereas previous generations of scholars sought to uncover the origins of America's "clumsy, jerry-built welfare state," more recently scholars have viewed the American welfare state as surprisingly strong, but distinctive in the way it channels benefits through private intermediaries and favors some groups over others.<sup>41</sup>

Picking up on a hugely influential body of social-science research,<sup>42</sup> historians have given us a far deeper understanding of the American welfare state. Jennifer Klein has revealed the role of insurance companies, corporate employers and labor unions in shaping the contours of American social provision.<sup>43</sup> Karen Tani has documented the efforts of federal reformers to build a more modern, uniform and centralized public assistance system, and the resistance these efforts faced from state and local authorities.<sup>44</sup> The sociologist Michele Landis Dauber has argued that the New Dealers sought to legitimize federal relief spending by grounding it in the tradition of emergency aid to victims of disaster, suggesting that a more robust rationale might have supported a more generous social welfare state.<sup>45</sup>

Much of the most vital historical research on the New Deal and the welfare state has focused on the racist and patriarchal dimensions of the New Deal social programs. Historians have long been aware that these programs excluded people on the basis of race and gender. But only recently have

they laid out, systematically, the way these exclusions reinforced and exacerbated racial and gender inequalities. Alice Kessler-Harris has shown how New Deal programs reflected a “gendered imagination” that envisioned a nation of patriarchal families headed by male breadwinners, denying women access to economic citizenship and, by extension, political power.<sup>46</sup> Suzanne Mettler has charted the way New Deal programs institutionalized gender by dividing benefits between nationally administered programs, largely for white men, and more variable state-administered programs for women.<sup>47</sup> Holly Allen has shown how the New Deal used gender narratives of “forgotten manhood” and “fallen womanhood” to build support for its programs.<sup>48</sup> Ira Katznelson has catalogued the many forms of racial exclusion written into the key New Deal social and labor programs, ranging from the Social Security Act to the G. I. Bill.<sup>49</sup> Mary Poole has done the same, though casting responsibility upon a larger range of actors—not only southern congressmen (who were at the center of Katznelson’s analysis), but also policy intellectuals, New Deal advisers and non-southern legislators.<sup>50</sup>

For many years, the New Deal’s economic development and public works programs received relatively little attention. But in recent years, scholars following in the footsteps of Jordan Schwarz have paid them greater due. Robert Leighninger has catalogued the vast range of New Deal infrastructure projects, making a compelling case for their long-term economic impact.<sup>51</sup> Jason Scott Smith has gone further, arguing that the New Deal produced a “revolution” in state-driven economic development that in turn helped to solidify the New Deal coalition even as it exacerbated political fissures within the Democratic Party.<sup>52</sup>

Rising interest in the developmentalist state, together with the flourishing of environmental history, has helped lead to a renaissance of studies of the rural New Deal—a topic that received relatively little attention from the previous generation of scholars. In a pioneering study, Sarah Phillips has shown that the New Deal incorporated a concern with the economic well-being of rural Americans into an older conservationist focus on the use of natural resources.<sup>53</sup> Neil Maher has situated the rise of the modern environmental movement in the history of Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps.<sup>54</sup> And the sociologist Jess Carr Gilbert has produced a striking revisionist account of the New Deal agriculture programs, taking seriously the New Dealers’ commitment to decentralized programs that involved local citizens in meaningful ways.<sup>55</sup>

In the New Deal literature, “the American state” still primarily means the national state—and little wonder, since historians have traditionally seen the New Deal as a watershed moment in the development of the national government. Recently, though, a number of scholars have focused on the way the New Deal reshaped non-national politics—and, indeed, depended upon the capacities of local and state governments. Gail Radford has noted that the New Deal encouraged the development of local/regional public authorities to support its long-range investment efforts.<sup>56</sup> Mason Williams has argued that the New Deal borrowed “auxiliary state capacity” from local governments in order to achieve its most ambitious projects—and, in turn, reorganized local politics in ways that allowed some of those projects to be sustained at the state and local level after the conservative turn in Congress curtailed the New Deal at the national level.<sup>57</sup> Karen Tani has noted that the New Dealers had little choice but to partner with state governments in their efforts to modernize poor relief administration—but that newly strengthened state bureaucracies later came to challenge the “the New Deal’s more liberal substantive commitments.”<sup>58</sup> Brent Cebul shows that local business elites, despite their anti-statist rhetoric, enthusiastically embraced New Deal developmental spending—which, ironically, underwrote a culture of “business producerism” that became associated with conservative opposition to Democratic liberalism.<sup>59</sup>

If historians have begun to rediscover the place of federalism and non-national politics within the New Deal story, they have gone much further in tracing that story’s transnational dimensions. Daniel Rodgers’s magisterial study of North Atlantic social politics helped historians to understand where the policy ideas that made up the New Deal came from—in turn, helping to clarify why such an extraordinary burst of policymaking was possible, and why its components were so eclectic.<sup>60</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, revisiting a line of comparative analysis first raised by John Garraty, has called attention



to some cultural features shared by the New Deal, National Socialism and Italian Fascism, such as monumental architecture and public works and an ethos of “back to the land.”<sup>61</sup> Synthesizing a vast body of scholarship (including his own), Kiran Klaus Patel has written the first “global history” of the New Deal, comparing America’s response to the economic crisis to those of nations in Europe, Latin America and Asia, and documenting the New Deal’s impact around the globe.<sup>62</sup>

Two of the most exciting areas of research in recent years have as yet had relatively little impact on our understanding of the New Deal—though this is beginning to change. The new history of capitalism has been slow to incorporate the New Deal, perhaps because the New Deal seems to fit uneasily with the emerging subfield’s interest in private investment, financialization and economization. Even so, several scholars have joined urban/metropolitan historians in looking closely at the New Deal’s impact upon private investment. Gabrielle Esperdy has charted how the Modernization Credit Plan, a relatively obscure New Deal program created under the 1934 Federal Housing Act, enabled small businesses to modernize their storefronts.<sup>63</sup> Louis Hyman has shown that Federal Housing Administration lending programs encouraged banks to enter the field of personal finance—an important moment of transition in the history of personal consumer debt.<sup>64</sup>

Likewise, historians of the carceral state have, by and large, skipped straight from Prohibition to the postwar period. But this, too, may be changing. Recently, Jeffrey Adler has called our attention to the fact that punishment increased in the 1930s despite the dramatic drop in crime following the end of Prohibition.<sup>65</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad has argued convincingly that a statistical discourse of black criminality forged in the decades before the New Deal circumscribed whatever potential for racial justice the New Deal might have held.<sup>66</sup> In coming years, we may expect more attention to the New Deal’s role in the development of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and on the way logics of discipline and control were embedded in social welfare institutions, which historians of postwar America now understand as deeply integrated with the carceral state.

Finally, a growing body of scholarship treats the New Deal as one phase of a longer process by which the American state has produced new categories, brought new technologies to bear upon governance and reshaped American culture. Wendy Wall has located the origins of wartime and postwar “consensus culture” in the efforts of a diverse array of groups (including New Deal officials) to forge a common national identity amidst the upheavals of the 1930s.<sup>67</sup> Scholars such as Matthew Frye Jacobson, Thomas Guglielmo and David Roediger have documented the role of New Deal policies in helping southern and eastern European immigrants and their children claim “whiteness,” and thereby the New Deal’s place in forging the mid-century racial binary.<sup>68</sup> Mae Ngai has shown how Depression-era administrators reconfigured the specter of the “illegal immigrant” by granting discretionary regularization to European illegal immigrants even as walking or swimming across the U.S.–Mexico border “emerged as the quintessential act of illegal immigration”—an important moment in the racialization of “illegal aliens.”<sup>69</sup> Margot Canaday has found that the production of new categories of sex and gender non-conformity was bound up in the state’s efforts to govern in areas such as migration, poverty and crime.<sup>70</sup> Dan Bouk concludes his account of how the rise of life insurance made Americans into “statistical subjects” with the advent of social security, a “risk-making system of unprecedented size” that transformed individuals into “statistical citizens,” in the process rendering them newly legible to the state and to private employers.<sup>71</sup> Timothy Shenk has documented the emergence of “the economy” as a subject of knowledge and an object of policy intervention, beginning in the 1930s—and the role of presidential rhetoric (beginning with Roosevelt’s) in transforming this technical concept into a basic language of American politics.<sup>72</sup>

The opening of the historical imagination that has occurred in the past half century has greatly enlivened research on Depression-era American politics and society. The consequent diversity of the research has made it more difficult to fit the pieces together into a coherent narrative than in the past. Nevertheless, historians continue to write the history of the New Deal as a whole. Recent years have seen the publication of two especially ambitious synthetic accounts (in addition to Patel’s global

history). The historian Jefferson Cowie has built upon older scholarship to argue that the New Deal itself, and the longer “New Deal order,” should be seen as a “great exception” in American politics: the product of a conjuncture of structural variables—low immigration, a spell in “religious moralism” and a “very rare moment of racial politics when Democrats could have it both ways,” embracing segregation while winning the support of African American voters—that did not exist before the interwar years and are unlikely to exist again.<sup>73</sup>

The political scientist and historian Ira Katznelson has clarified what was at stake in 1930s America by situating the New Deal within the context of a global crisis of liberal democracy; in Katznelson’s hands, the New Deal becomes not only a watershed in American politics, but “the most important twentieth-century testing ground for representative democracy in the age of mass politics.” Putting Congress at the center of the story and extending the timeframe through Dwight D. Eisenhower’s inauguration, Katznelson concludes that the New Deal’s greatest achievement lay in demonstrating the capacity of liberal democracy to govern in the face of danger and fear. Yet it did so, he makes clear, only by means of a “rotten compromise” with the white-supremacist South. Liberal democracy, Katznelson concludes, “prospered as a result of an accommodation with racial humiliation,” an alliance that circumscribed the New Deal’s transformative potential even as it laid the groundwork for the destruction of Jim Crow.<sup>74</sup>

If these syntheses show how much analytical value may be found in revisiting older ways of thinking about the New Deal, a survey of more recent work suggests that historians may be on the threshold of making a fundamental break from established categories, questions and periodizations. Much of the most interesting scholarship of recent years has examined, not the New Deal per se, but rather how the New Deal functioned as one important episode in a broader story: The age of “social politics” (globally and locally); the making of America’s public-private insurance and welfare system; the relation of state-building to gender category formation; the remaking of Jim Crow’s political economy and built environment; the structuring of American racial and gender inequality; the rise of “statistical citizens”; and the invention of “the American economy.” This scholarship has decentered “the New Deal.” But in doing so, it has given us a greater understanding of the many profound ways in which the New Deal shaped American life. Shifting away from categories and questions inherited from the old presidential synthesis and the related notion of “cycles of reform,” it has generated new ways of thinking about governance, subjectivity and citizenship.

Twenty years ago, in a literature review similar to this one, the historian Alan Brinkley noted that Arthur Schlesinger’s classic interpretation of the New Deal remained fundamentally intact, though it had been subjected to evolutionary changes.<sup>75</sup> Historians still treated the New Deal as a discrete episode, and they retained a primary interest in its internal logic, its successes and its failures. To them, the New Deal represented, above all, “the central event in the progress of the modern United States toward greater unity and democracy,” though they were increasingly aware of the constraints upon that progress.<sup>76</sup> Today’s historians are more likely to note the ways in which the New Deal failed to afford greater unity and democracy—yet, when we speak of the New Deal as a whole, the classic interpretation continues to set the terms of discussion. In scholarship itself, though, the classic framework has become largely irrelevant. We have, it appears, finally managed to move past the old paradigm, though we have not yet forged a new one.

## Notes

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