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# The Interwar Years

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LISA McGIRR

In *The Age of Extremes*, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm labeled the years from World War I to World War II the “era of catastrophe.” He pointed above all to the unprecedented human devastation wrought in a span of less than thirty years: Two global conflagrations bookended the near collapse of world capitalism and the rise of new authoritarian regimes. For one belligerent, however, this age of “catastrophe” brought triumph as well as tragedy. By the end of World War I, the United States was the world’s largest economy and most powerful state. In the decades that followed, Americans grappled with the rigors and rewards of this new role—vast economic growth sparked revolutions in consumption, leisure, and work but also demanded a newly active state that redrew the bounds of citizenship and struggled to find its place as a world leader. The collapse of the pillars of the world economy in 1929 brought a more inclusive, democratic capitalism in the United States in sharp contrast to the authoritarianism that prevailed in much of Europe. During World War II, ideas about the state’s relationship to citizens advanced during the New Deal gained firmer footing and became the foundation of the social order during America’s “Golden Years.” The interwar years arguably gave birth to the ideas, institutions, and politics of the modern United States.

Early accounts, such as Frederick Lewis Allen’s popular portrait, *Only Yesterday*, emphasized the sharp break between the prosperous but culturally turbulent 1920s and the decade of economic struggle and political reform that followed. Professional historians, too, emphasized the contrast between the irresponsible era of so-called freewheeling capitalism and the

new path of modern liberalism that America embarked on with the New Deal “revolution.” Since then, however, historians have looked beyond stark morality tales to understand how the 1920s set the stage for what followed. Historical interpretations now lean to a view of the 1920s not so much as an anomalous period sandwiched between two eras of reform but as a decade that helped lay the groundwork for the expansion of state authority during the New Deal.

Above all, historians have discovered that the interwar period as a whole was marked by increases in federal authority. The relationship between the state and its citizens was redefined first in wartime, then through the far-reaching experiment of national Prohibition, and most consequentially, through the New Deal and World War II. Out of this period, a distinctly American warfare/welfare state emerged, a product of the unprecedented demands of global crisis but also America’s deep antistatist traditions. The state that emerged from World War II as the world’s first superpower was limited and shaped, scholars emphasize, by the distrust of central authority, substantial political and constitutional arrangements impeding change, and a meager (by European standards) administrative state. Just as scholars have found more statism in the “conservative” 1920s, they have tempered their accounts of the New Deal “revolution” to take into account the limits of reform.

Given the importance of the transformations of the state during these years, many historians, not surprisingly, have focused on national policy and politics. Yet textured social and cultural histories, like those that have so enriched our interpretations of earlier periods of U.S. history, are now plentiful. Investigations by a generation of historians have now enhanced our understanding of the experiences of distinctive communities in the interwar years. Important themes that would preoccupy Americans after World War II, from sexual freedom and consumption to civil rights, are being traced back through these decades with many exciting discoveries.

## THE WORLD THE WAR MADE

Despite its brevity, America’s intervention in World War I had profound international and domestic consequences. Ellis Hawley, William Leuchtenburg, Lynn Dumenil, and David Kennedy have painted in broad strokes the “Great War’s” impact on the American economy, state, and culture. The war, they all agree, positioned the United States as the world’s leading capitalist economy. While the decade opened with a recession, national income increased by more than 40 percent from 1922 to 1929. The war, as scholars note, expanded state authority in multiple ways. Wartime planning boards instituted wage and price controls, consumer rationing, and economic planning. Private authorities, however, quickly regained authority upon conversion to peacetime, leading William Leuchtenburg, in *The Perils of Prosperity*, to conclude that business emerged if anything more dominant. Other scholars, however, such as Ellis Hawley, argue that the trend

toward central, managerial planning evident in wartime marched forward inside the nation's giant corporations as well as in state agencies charged with serving the economy. An "organizational revolution," according to Hawley and other scholars of the "organizational synthesis," defined the process of historical change in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, stretching across the Progressive period, wartime, and into the 1920s as power shifted to bureaucracies and organized interest groups. Managerial elites pursued progressive goals of "social efficiency" and a more ordered economy, stressing, however, that these goals were to be achieved through voluntary arrangements not public authority. Herbert Hoover's "associationalism" and the growth of trade associations served as important examples of business-government cooperation that belied the *laissez-faire* rhetoric of the period and linked scientific expertise, efficiency, and planning to bring "order" to capitalism. Beneath the clash of federal agents and radical groups, Ellis Hawley and others saw an arguably more significant economic centralization that began earlier and would only accelerate in later years.

Other scholars, more concerned with political culture than with managerial organization, have emphasized social and political conflict and the drive for conformity that, they argue, shaped these years. The war brought with it a new heavy-handed repression by the state, with antiwar dissenters the prime target. Earlier scholars including John Higham, William Leuchtenburg, and William Preston emphasized the tragic consequences of wartime drives for conformity for personal freedoms and liberties. Recently, Christopher Capozzola has added a new dimension to these discussions. He argued that the war was a turning point when state coercion superseded voluntaristic vigilantism. In a similar vein Jennifer Fronc, looking at New York, argued that the war fostered a new intersection of the state with private antivice citizen organizations. The army worked closely with already established private groups to control prostitution and repress "vice." According to these latest studies, the activism and reach of social control efforts during World War I contributed to expanded state authority. The antiradical drives that continued after the war—the "Red Scare"—were driven, however, not only by exaggerated fears of internal enemies first generated in the frenzy of wartime repression, but also by actual deeds of revolutionary violence by a small faction of the American left. Beverly Gage's evocative description of the September 1920 Wall Street bombing in which thirty-eight people were killed and hundreds injured marked this moment as "America's first age of terror," a bitter new chapter in the long history of violence in America's class relations.

Wartime drives for conformity and the postwar Red Scare consolidated the state's investigative bureaucracy. Importantly, however, heavy-handed repressive crusades also launched campaigns to defend civil and personal liberty. Ernest Freeberg sees the clemency movement to free Eugene Debs from prison, for example, as an anticipation of important strains of modern liberalism. The war was a major episode of nationalism, conformity,

and state coercion that in its extremism gave rise to new ideas and new organizations concerned with civil and personal liberties.

Few scholars dispute that the exigencies of the war marginalized the public debates that had animated the Progressive period: questions of equity, concentration of private economic power, and the nature of participation in a democratic polity. Wartime missionary zeal contributed to the achievement of a few signal Progressive goals such as woman suffrage and national Prohibition, but most historians, echoing contemporary social critics such as Randolph Bourne, have stressed the devastating consequences of the war for the larger goals of progressivism and, all the more so, for dissent and critical debate from figures on the radical left.

What happened, then, to progressivism in the war's wake? Early accounts such as William Leuchtenburg's influential synthesis labeled 1920s progressivism "tired" and emphasized a deep retreat into the private and away from reformist impulse of the prewar years. Other historians, however, challenged this view. Arthur Link, in an influential article written around the same time as *The Perils of Prosperity*, called on scholars to investigate continuities between the earlier Progressive movement and reform in the 1920s. He emphasized the continued strength of progressivism on the state and local level, despite the conservative national Republican administrations. Recent scholars concur: Alan Dawley has charted the "leaner and meaner" progressivism of the 1920s, more self-consciously left-wing and internationalist. "Progressivism," he contends, "trekked through the political desert of the Coolidge years," helping to prepare the ground for New Deal reform. Daniel Rodgers, while pointing to the devastating consequences of the war for "reform brokers," also saw continuity in the transatlantic Progressive vision that stretched from the 1890s through the New Deal. Reform brokers' municipal ownership campaigns in the late nineteenth century, cooperative experiments of the 1920s, and New Deal social security and unemployment programs borrowed heavily from European ideas. Cosmopolitan reformers contributed to a distinctive "anti-exceptionalist" moment, seeking to abandon the parochial blinders of an earlier more provincial America. Transnational borrowings, moreover, moved in both directions. Even though Republican administrations retreated into isolationism and a "return to normalcy," "Wilsonian internationalism" strongly influenced the ideas and aspirations of reformers abroad. In Erez Manela's telling, nationalist reformers from Egypt to India drew on Wilson's discourse of self-determination in building their own anticolonial movements for independence.

Artists and writers in the United States rejected provincial political culture as well. They found inspiration abroad, rejecting what they saw as the moralistic and commercially oriented middle-brow American culture just as such elements of American culture as the blues and jazz found audiences in Europe. Drawing on European modernism, artists and writers forged a "modernist" sensibility. Synthetic cultural treatments of the period, such as Stanley Coben's *Rebellion against Victorianism*, as well as works by Ann

Douglas and Christine Stansell on New York and Brooke Blower's book on American sojourners in Paris, chart this emerging ethos. Stansell focuses on a group of New York "bohemians" and the blossoming of ideas of sexual radicalism and individual freedom in the 1910s. Important developments within the culture of the 1920s (from the popularization of Freud to scientific relativism, secularism, and the "new womanhood") had roots in the prewar years. These cultural currents were welcome antidotes to the values of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. While this was a liberating development for some segments of the population, it produced tremendous uncertainty for others. For every flapper or urban bohemian enchanted with these changes there were many religious white Protestant men and women worried that the dominance of a set of beliefs undergirding their way of life was under challenge, as George Marsden's work on religious fundamentalism reminds us.

The sense of living in "modern times" in the interwar years was undergirded by changes in the economy, especially the emergence of a new Fordist model of capitalism, and the arrival of mass consumption and mass culture. The availability of new products, new debt structures, and an increasingly sophisticated national advertising industry fueled the new mass-consumption society. Louis Hyman's innovative work charts the new debt practices that shaped the emergence of the modern credit system in the wake of World War I. Earlier, Roland Marchand and Jackson Lears investigated the role of advertisers and advertisements in soothing the adjustment process to a new world of plentiful goods. In other words, advertisers served therapeutic as well as economic functions. These new experts, Marchand emphasizes, geared their ads to a "class market" of affluent consumers. Advertisers were attuned to the fact that most Americans' incomes precluded full participation in the world of mass consumption. While earlier studies assumed widespread prosperity, Marchand's work reminds us of the unevenness of the prosperity of the 1920s. Frank Stricker tells us that despite economic growth and rising per capita income, layoffs and periodic unemployment undermined security for working-class men and women.

We now have a deepening understanding of these working-class men and women thanks to the work of a generation of social historians. While few would disagree with Irving Bernstein that these were "lean years" for organized labor, recent historians have uncovered rich veins of working-class experience in this period of relative labor quiescence by turning to the realm of community, culture, and consumption. George Sanchez's *Becoming Mexican American*, for example, investigates the aspirations and adaptive strategies of Mexican American workers in Los Angeles who labored in service and unskilled industry. Focusing on community and ethnic identity, he contends that Americanization efforts by private organizations and employers met resistance because of Mexican Americans' deep allegiances and ties to Mexico. Mexican identity and culture was continually reinforced through immigration and return migration. Persistent and widespread racial discrimination also bred ambivalence about Americanization.

Becky Nicolaides's *My Blue Heaven* investigates white working-class men and women in Los Angeles. She charts how the social, community, and economic setting of these workers influenced their political beliefs and their economic strategies. Homeownership, for example, was a key strategy to achieve security. Its importance to workers' identities shifted the center of gravity in their lives away from the workplace and contributed to the nationally significant emergence of post-World War II political conservatism.

Lizabeth Cohen has identified the rise of a somewhat different set of political loyalties in her study of Chicago workers. She traces the rise of industrial unionism and the New Deal among the Windy City's ethnic industrial workers to significant changes in the popular attitudes of ordinary workers in the 1920s. Mass culture and mass consumption did not make ethnic workers more "middle class," but it did contribute to shared national, ethnic, and working-class identities. The failure of ethnic institutions and welfare capitalism during the Great Depression in turn opened doors for shifting loyalties to the Democratic Party and industrial unionism. In a somewhat different vein, Dana Frank's study of Seattle workers also points to the political meanings of consumption and its use by workers in that locale as a labor organizing strategy. These investigations suggest that what was once thought to be antithetical to working-class consciousness was in fact a building block for labor organizing and even for a new form of mass unionism, and thus a crucial site of investigation for historians.

Mass consumption and mass culture have been a powerful new frame of reference not only for historians' studies of ethnic white workers, but also as a lens to study flourishing black urban life. In the wake of the migration of African Americans to the North so artfully detailed by James Grossman, African Americans in the 1920s enjoyed new cultural, community, and political mobilization. Davarian Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes* investigates the tensions between newcomers and older residents in Chicago and argues that the new mass-consumption marketplace enabled the black masses and intellectuals to forge new ideas and cultural creations. Recent scholars have also enriched our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance. Earlier investigations by Nathan Huggins and David Levering Lewis have now been supplemented by the work of scholars such as A. B. Christa Schwarz, Geneviève Fabre, and Michel Feith, who are struck by its sexual boundary crossing and international dimensions. Claudrena Harold, in addition, has deepened our knowledge of the vast mobilizations of African Americans led by Marcus Garvey. She persuasively argues that urban centers not just in the North but also in New South cities, like New Orleans, were strongholds for Garvey's variant of black nationalism. The civil rights movement, moreover, commonly centered decades later, has also been pushed back into the 1920s. Mark Schneider, Alfred Brophy, and Glenda Gilmore identify the years immediately following World War I as a time of heightened black militancy driven in part by racial violence and virulent discrimination. These historians locate the ancestors of the later civil rights movement in the relatively unsung tales of the interwar period.

If the interwar period brought new visibility and cultural assertiveness to African Americans, it also propelled social, cultural, and political change for women. Nancy Cott, Kimberly Jensen, and Maurine Greenwald, among others, have charted the distinctive meaning of this moment for women and for gender roles more broadly, at work, in politics, and in the realm of ideas. Greenwald and Jensen investigate women within wartime mobilization, in the military and industry, respectively. Jensen homes in on specific groups of women such as nurses and physicians in the military, while Greenwald investigates women workers within three industries. Both point to the limited gains women made during World War I and the persistence of a gendered understanding of citizenship. Greenwald concludes that while World War I accelerated trends already under way, with proportions of women in the labor force increasing and women moving into different types of jobs, most of these jobs were still within the realm of traditional female work. Cott looks more closely at changes in the wake of the war. With the achievement of female suffrage, older ideas of female decorum were superseded by new images of womanhood and new opportunities in education and work. With the vote in hand, women continued to be active in business organizations, women's clubs, and international peace mobilizations. Women in the 1920s, moreover, sought to bring ideas of modernity and scientific competence to their traditional roles of housework and child rearing. More recent work by Nikki Brown, Lisa Materson, and Victoria Wolcott broaden the analysis by focusing on the experiences and activism of African-American women, reminding us of their important contributions to community formation and gender, racial, and electoral politics in the interwar years. And chapters on the interwar years in broader synthetic surveys by Judy Yung and Vicki Ruiz complicate efforts to speak of a "unified" women's experience by pointing to the distinctive histories of Chinese and Mexican women.

The social and cultural histories of distinctive communities suggest that this was a moment of deepening pluralism and cultural experimentation. This interpretation is, however, only partial. At least one scholar has labeled these years the "tribal twenties," pointing to the prevailing nativism, ideas of scientific racism, and immigration restriction. The period was one of tension and paradox. Ever since Robert and Helen Lynd's classic sociological study of Middletown, historians have sought to understand these tensions. The Lynds argued that the rapid modernization dating to the late nineteenth century increased social stratification, weakened community solidarity, and fractured a "value consensus" that had marked earlier years. Later historians have sought to identify the fault lines of this fractured consensus. Richard Hofstadter and William Leuchtenburg, among others, have placed the fault line along a primarily urban-rural divide. Recent scholarship has complicated this view. Lynn Dumenil, for example, identifies the pattern of conflict not so much as an urban-rural divide but as a struggle between white, Protestant, and religious (both urban and rural) men and women and increasingly secular and pluralist sensibilities

forged by a new middle class, immigrants, and Catholics. As Kenneth Jackson notes, after all, the Klan flourished in urban as well as in rural areas. And David Kyvig and John Timberlake suggest that the crusade to dry up America drew support not only in purportedly antimodern rural communities, but among many urban, middle-class Progressives as well.

Nativist impulses, so well charted by John Higham's classic study *Strangers in the Land*, contributed to the push for immigration restriction and culminated in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. Mae Ngai and Matthew Jacobson have added to our understanding of the significance of this important legislation. Jacobson sees it as an important turning point on the path to a more unified and consolidated vision of the "white race" that took hold between the 1920s and 1940s. This new idea of a consolidated "whiteness" superseded an earlier emphasis on a hierarchy of distinctive white European races. Cultural products (movies such as *The Jazz Singer*) as well as legislation, according to Jacobson, contributed to "whitening" "probationary" white groups such as Jews and Eastern and Southern Europeans.

Mai Ngai reinterprets Johnson-Reed from a different angle. In *Impossible Subjects*, she investigates new understandings of race and citizenship encoded in the national quota system. She agrees with Jacobson that the law both affirmed a hierarchy among Europeans and unified them as one "white" race, marginalizing immigrants from outside Europe. But Ngai emphasizes something else about this moment: The law not only marked the culmination of a long history of Asian exclusion by barring all East and South Asians from immigration or becoming citizens, but also created a new, racialized category of "illegal aliens." Both these studies point to the heightened racial thinking of this era. Gary Gerstle also characterized this as a period when "racial nationalism" dominated over the strands of "civic nationalism" in a sweeping study of competing ideas of American nationhood in the twentieth century.

No organization contributed to the visibility of ideas of racial nationalism during these years more than the Ku Klux Klan. Generations of historians have sought to explain the second Klan's vast influence, with a membership of between three and five million at its peak. Earlier scholars emphasized the Klan's right-wing extremism and portrayed its adherents as marginal men and women. More recent scholarship has provided a starkly different portrait. Leonard Moore, Kathleen Blee, and Nancy MacLean, among others, have emphasized the Klan's appeal to a broad population of white, Protestant men and women throughout the Midwest, West and South. Leonard Moore's *Citizen Klansman* provides a revealing investigation of the Klan's success in the stronghold state of Indiana, where it took the form of a civic association, not terribly unlike other fraternal orders such as the Elks or the Odd Fellows. Kathleen Blee, also looking at Indiana, concurs in her study of the women of the Ku Klux Klan. White Protestant women viewed the women's Klan as a kind of respectable "social club," albeit one whose purpose was to uphold 100 percent Americans

against Catholics, African Americans, and immigrants. Klan adherents' innocuous self-definitions, however, belied the real damage done by their boycotts and whispering campaigns against Catholic and Jewish businesses, as well as Protestants deemed guilty of "illicit" behavior. In contrast to Indiana's relatively peaceful Klan, Nancy MacLean finds the Klan in Atlanta just as "normal" but much more violent. Violence and terror, she argues, were central to the Klan's brand of "reactionary populism." The southern order engaged in violence to a greater degree because local power structures made it possible. By looking at the Klan at the grass roots, these historians have provided a nuanced portrait of who joined the organization in different regions of the country and why. We still need, however, a better understanding of the reasons for the Klan's meteoric rise and fall. If the Klan drew so heavily from broadly shared white Protestant ideas of white supremacy, why was it so short-lived and so vulnerable to attacks by other social groups?

One of the interesting findings of recent scholarship on the Klan is the intersection between militant temperance sentiments and the hooded order. Blee contends that temperance activism was one route into the Klan, and Moore agrees that crusades to dry up local new towns were important to Klan recruitment efforts. The Athens Klan that MacLean charts also got its start in a campaign to dry up the city. By organizing drives to "clean up" communities and put bootleggers out of business, the Klan became a popular means of acting on militant temperance sentiments.

Prohibition not only contributed to shaping Klan drives for "law and order," but was, indeed, the most important issue driving public debate during these years. Ratified in January 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment, which outlawed the sale, manufacture, transportation, import, and export of intoxicating beverages, went into effect in January 1920 and was rescinded fourteen years later. The United States' "dry" experiment, with its fascinating stories of bootleggers, moonshine, and bathtub gin, continues to appeal to popular audiences, demonstrated most recently by Ken Burns's scheduled television documentary and the accompanying narrative history by journalist Dan Okrent. Yet, while we have a vast body of scholarly work on the close to one hundred year long temperance movement, there are fewer works of scholarship on national Prohibition itself. This is unfortunate, because as Robert Post in an important article on the Taft Supreme Court reminds us, this social experiment wrought the single greatest expansion of federal authority since Reconstruction. It caused a major crisis in the theory and practices of American federalism. Justices on the Court were forced to revise their judicial philosophies on the assumption that the administrative state was an unalterable reality. Still, recent work has debunked the outdated psychological and clinical portrait by Andrew Sinclair of Prohibition as a rural virus. Scholars have charted the movement's ties to urban progressive reformers. Michael Lerner's case study of the dry years in New York, for example, arguably one of the the wettest cities of the nation, reveals a far more complex struggle within urban politics. He points

to the support for Prohibition among many middle-class reformers and emphasizes the opposition of working-class ethnic New Yorkers, who were the special targets of urban reform and law enforcement efforts to stop the flow of bootleg liquor. George Chauncey, Chad Heap, and Kevin Mumford have charted how Prohibition contributed to the flourishing of “illicit” urban subcultures, such as gay life and new interracial zones of socializing that challenged the agenda of “moral purity” forces. David Burner and Kristi Andersen have traced the divisions over Prohibition within the Democratic Party. Burner argues that prohibition contributed to the split between the Democratic Party’s rural, dry, and Protestant wing and its urban Catholic “wet” wing. The party’s two wings fought bloody battles over nativism, the Klan, and Prohibition at its 1924 convention. And by 1928, the party’s urban wet wing demonstrated its newfound strength when Al Smith won the presidential nomination.

Kristi Andersen identifies this moment as crucial to the increased allegiance of immigrant ethnic voters to the Democratic Party after 1928, an alignment that would solidify during the New Deal. Hoover trumped Smith in a landslide vote with strong support among the “dry forces” (including luminous Progressive leaders such as Jane Addams). But the passage of the Jones Act in 1929, which made first offenses a felony, galvanized opposition to prohibition. David Kyvig and Kenneth Rose have charted deepening opposition to the amendment, investigating the critical role of an influential group of men and women in the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA) and the Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform. Opposition, however, extended well beyond the elite ranks of the AAPA. My own forthcoming work traces these wider currents of opposition and the broad implications of how Prohibition was enforced in distinct regions and among different social classes. I argue that the amendment was central to reshaping politics and political culture in these years. While many historians, moreover, have argued that Prohibition contributed to deepening antistatist sensibilities and a distrust of state power, I argue that it did at least as much to encourage the opposite: Ironically, a decade of debate over the merits of Prohibition in public and private discourse helped to legitimize state regulation. The debate challenged not so much the government’s right to regulate as what the parameters of regulation should be.

The economic crisis of the Great Depression sealed the fate of this radical experiment, already weakened by a decade of federal failure to enforce the law. Policy makers grew increasingly receptive to wet arguments that legalizing the liquor industry would generate employment and tax revenue. One of Roosevelt’s first acts in office was to sign the Beer and Wine Revenue Act, anticipating the repeal of national Prohibition and effectively ending the social experiment. The experience of national Prohibition had highlighted for a broad segment of the public the real danger posed to personal liberty by the linkage of “morality” and politics. During the New Deal, state regulation focused on economic life, steering clear of the regu-

lation of public “moral” behavior that had convulsed the legal and political system during the 1920s.

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression, according to Eric Hobsbawm, was “the largest global earthquake ever to be measured on the economic historians’ Richter scale.” The United States was its epicenter. Nobody knew if or when the capitalist economy would recover. The popular notion that the stock market crash in and of itself caused the Great Depression has been widely discredited by economic historians. Yet scholars vary widely in their emphasis on other causal factors. Keynesian explanations, favored by those like Arthur Schlesinger and John Kenneth Galbraith, place blame on the imbalances in the U.S. domestic economy in the 1920s. The deep agricultural depression during the decade contributed to a vast imbalance between the rural and industrial economies. Not only was prosperity uneven, but rising income inequality also meant that mass demand could not keep pace with rising productivity. By the decade’s end, businesses had amassed a staggering surplus of unsold inventory. That so many consumer goods were purchased on installment plans, moreover, meant that business was balanced on a shaky foundation of consumer debt. Easy credit in housing and other sectors had also contributed to a speculative bubble. The credit-fueled speculative frenzy came to a crashing halt with the stock market’s fall. In the wake of the crash in October 1929, undercapitalized banks struggled to keep afloat. The causes of the Great Depression for Keynesians were thus rooted in underconsumption, income inequality, and insufficient regulation of the free market, especially the banking sector. It was a crisis, these historians argue, of “the old order” of laissez-faire capitalism.

Other economists and historians have offered different perspectives. While not ignoring national economic problems, they emphasize the imbalances in the international economy to explain the worldwide scope and depth of the crisis. The punitive reparations policies after World War I, according to Charles Kindelsberger, Eric Hobsbawm, and David Kennedy, among others, made a stable world economy impossible. Debt repayment had only taken place with massive American loans during the 1920s. When American lending declined between 1927 and 1933, international lending dropped by 90 percent, and the postwar order in Europe effectively collapsed. The United States, while undeniably the powerhouse for world capitalism, failed to act as a global stabilizer in its role as the leading creditor nation. Each state, instead, attempted to protect its economy from outside threats. The Great Depression in America, according to this more global view, was both a cause and a consequence of a larger international crisis.

While scholars have pointed to a multiplicity of causal factors in the national and international economy to explain the Great Depression, some influential economists have contributed narrower, technical explanations.

Monetarists Anna Schwartz and Milton Friedman, and Peter Temin, for example, blame the feckless policies of the Federal Reserve that supplied loose credit and then unwisely restricted the money supply at a moment of contraction. This decision, in turn, exacerbated a deflationary spiral and contributed to the collapse of the economy. The unprecedented scope of the crisis was due to inept policy elites, whose actions distorted the cyclical workings of the free market and unwittingly made the Depression “great.” While the monetarist theory is appealingly simple, most scholars continue to argue that broader domestic and international imbalances of the economy that arose in the wake of World War I were the essential ingredients of the global worldwide crisis.

To these explanations, Michael Bernstein’s *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change* has contributed another layer of interpretation by asking why recovery efforts came to naught until World War II. What made the Great Depression great, Bernstein argues was a “secular shift” in the United States economy that coincided with a cyclical downturn. The nation’s economic growth was increasingly driven by industries in their infancy—from petrochemicals and processed food to plastics and glass. These dynamic sectors, just taking off at a moment of cyclical downturn, were too small and vulnerable to drive a robust recovery. New Deal policies exacerbated this problem because they understandably but unwisely focused on reviving the older engines of industrial growth. As a result, only the unprecedented production demands of World War II inspired a full economic recovery. While it failed to end the Depression, however, the New Deal did continue and consolidate the long-term emergence of the federal government as a key actor in the nation’s social and economic life.

## THE NEW DEAL

The New Deal is still seen as a landmark in the emergence of the modern political economy of the United States. It cemented federal responsibility for economic regulation, provided a federal safety net for citizens, and forged public policies that significantly enhanced the rights of ordinary workers. Not surprisingly, historians (as well as sociologists and political scientists) ever since have sought to understand the origins, character, and social forces behind this burst of policy innovation. The literature is far too vast to be summarized here. Instead, this chapter seeks to sketch the broadest analytical contours of historical interpretation.

Presidential syntheses dominated early accounts of the New Deal with Franklin D. Roosevelt towering front and center in grand synthetic narratives by Arthur Schlesinger, Frank Freidel, William Leuchtenburg, and others. These scholars wrote with the battles over New Deal reform fresh in mind, and from a largely sympathetic liberal perspective, though many had hoped for more far-reaching reform. Roosevelt’s confident charismatic personality, his experimentalism, liberal adaptability, and leadership skills,

according to these historians, were at the heart of the successful passage of many policy initiatives. Out of the Depression crisis, Roosevelt navigated treacherous political waters with aplomb, distanced himself from his patrician roots, championed the “people” as against the “interests,” and in the process consolidated a new Democratic coalition. While these scholars acknowledged Roosevelt’s lack of a consistently modern liberal vision (demonstrated by his concern with balanced budgets), they emphasized the deep roots of his progressive reform ethos, apparent during his term as governor of New York, and his call for a more expansive and active administrative state that strongly contrasted with the conservatism of his predecessor, Herbert Hoover. With Franklin D. Roosevelt at the helm, the New Deal reformed capitalism in a more equitable vein, leaving behind the laissez-faire nostrums of the Republican “old order.” This interpretative line continues to find voice in the venerable popular presidential biographies churned out for a general audience, most recently H. W. Brands’s provocatively titled *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*.

Another influential interpretation of the New Deal stresses the antecedents of its policies in developments already under way in the “period of prosperity.” Herbert Hoover looms large in these revisionist accounts. Ellis Hawley, Joan Hoff Wilson, and most recently David Kennedy all emphasize Hoover’s “progressive” philosophy of government. In contrast to earlier laissez-faire Republicans, Hoover sought to utilize the state to provide knowledge and expertise to business to drive economic growth. While he refused to embrace a public authority to regulate business directly, he hoped to manage social change through informed, albeit limited, state activism as a sponsor for industrial associations. He championed the use of social scientific expertise, knowledge, and information in order to sustain a sound economy. Hoover drew from a broad font of progressive ideas but remained firm in his commitment to what he called “American Individualism.” After the stock market crash, he sought to utilize the existing instruments of the state in cooperation with business to alleviate the crisis. Indeed, these scholars point out, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s legislative efforts of the first one hundred days drew on many ideas first formulated by the Hoover administration.

Other scholars have deemphasized Hoover in favor of broader private organizational strategies in the post-World War I period that similarly informed New Deal policies. Colin Gordon, for example, argues that the New Deal was the culmination of strategies of economic organization and regulation promoted by capitalists with a thirst for order first tasted under the wartime production regime. These capitalist reformers pursued a shaky framework of private regulation during the 1920s: They organized in trade associations and sought to manage labor relations through welfare capitalist schemes and a less adversarial “new unionism.” These private efforts foundered, however, due to shortsightedness, disorganization, and competition. The variety of experiments undertaken in the 1920s, including a

“pastiche of labor-management accords,” were given institutional and legal substance during the New Deal. In a somewhat different vein, Lizabeth Cohen also points to the debt the New Deal (and successful efforts to organize industrial workers in the 1930s) owed to shifts in cultural attitudes among workers under way since the 1920s. Workplace entitlements like welfare capitalism, mass consumption, and mass culture altered workers’ expectations and experiences. When the Great Depression brought ethnic institutions and welfare capitalist schemes to their knees, workers turned their allegiances to the Democratic Party and the new industrial unions.

If the New Deal owed a debt to developments already under way in the 1920s, that raises the question of whether New Deal reform was radical or conservative. Was there, moreover, any ideological vision behind New Deal policy? And who among all these actors old and fresh “made the New Deal”? Such questions have animated investigations of the New Deal for several decades. Liberal champions, like Arthur Schlesinger, originally cast the New Deal as a struggle of “the people against the interests” and emphasized the social revolution that the New Deal accomplished. Later historians, still sympathetic to the New Deal project, felt compelled to take a more nuanced view. Anthony Badger and William Leuchtenburg, for example, highlight the many somewhat contradictory programs that constituted the New Deal’s legislative response to relief, reform, and recovery. Leuchtenburg emphasizes the pluralism at the New Deal’s heart: its ideological core was its willingness to experiment. More recently, David Kennedy has found a unifying principle for New Dealers that he labels “security.” By providing protection to business groups as well as ordinary Americans against the vagaries of free-market capitalism, the New Deal sought to reduce risk and provide a minimal safety net by making the state the lender, spender, and employer of last resort. Kennedy emphasizes, however, that the New Deal was built along distinctly American lines, falling far short of a European-style welfare state, thereby leaving many citizens at the mercy of the market.

Given this marked contrast with European states, many scholars have explored why the New Deal took the shape it did, with programs that were often flawed and cobbled together. Even the New Deal’s signature triumph, Social Security, as Mark Leff has reminded us, was financed, after all, with regressive payroll taxes and excluded domestic and agricultural workers from benefits, a signature departure from other models of universal insurance. In the late 1960s, New Left scholars cast an even more critical eye toward the New Deal, pointing to its failure to resolve issues of poverty and discrimination. They argued that the New Deal was, in fact, conservative in its achievements. According to Barton Bernstein, Howard Zinn, and others, Franklin D. Roosevelt succeeded in rescuing capitalism and co-opting demands for more radical social change from below. Writing at a time when the New Left was struggling to break the hold of a seemingly hegemonic corporate liberal order, these authors held the New Deal responsible for its creation.

Faced with the decline of even moderate liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, another group of scholars has sought to understand the collapse of what they see as a relatively stable “New Deal order” by investigating the distinctive social forces that made the New Deal possible. They emphasize the often contradictory elements that joined to create the New Deal “breakthrough.” Steve Fraser and Thomas Ferguson argue that the New Deal forged a new “historic bloc” of organized labor, the state, and a powerful segment of capital. This coalition, which found its home in the Democratic Party, shaped and constrained the more radical impulses of reformers. For Ferguson, an alliance of multinational and capital-intensive industries along with organized labor interests enabled the later New Deal. Steve Fraser emphasizes, in contrast, the importance of progressive capitalists like Peter Filene and union leaders like Sidney Hillman who promoted mass consumption and favored a new alliance between business, labor, and the state to promote a high standard of living and economic growth. Although different in their emphases, both Fraser and Ferguson agree on the centrality of managerial elites in shaping the New Deal. Its success as a political movement was best explained not as a radical flowering of ideas from below but as a top-down achievement orchestrated from above. Social contradictions at the New Deal’s heart, these scholars emphasize, explain both the limits of the New Deal’s achievements and its later fragmentation.

Other political scientists, sociologists, and historians, however, have explained the limits of the New Deal by emphasizing the constraining political environment of the 1930s. Barry Karl has pointed to the deep traditions of antistatism, a federal system with a sometimes crippling separation of powers, and powerful brakes on major policy shifts and the pursuit of a coordinated national program. James Patterson has emphasized the limiting effect of the conservative southern Democrats and their strong ideological opposition to an overt system of government welfare. While central to the Roosevelt coalition, southern Democrats chafed against the urban-liberal tilt within the party and fought energetically with the proponents of more radical reform. Their opposition, according to Patterson, played a key role in shaping the clumsy, partial welfare system that emerged. Charles Trout, Bruce Stave, and others have also noted the extent to which the New Deal strengthened urban political machines by giving them control of new federal programs rather than centralizing power in Washington.

All these constraints speak to the importance of the nature of American governmental and political institutions in shaping the New Deal’s limited accomplishments. Indeed, a group of sociologists and political scientists have argued that the character of the American state itself is critical to understanding the failings of the New Deal. Kenneth Finegold, Theda Skocpol, and Margaret Weir, among others, have sought to “bring the state back in” to understand these limits. Prior administrative state capacity as well as political-constitutional forms such as winner-take-all elections are both critical factors that influenced the shape of the New Deal. Looking at the National Recovery Administration, for example, Skocpol argues that

the absence of prior sufficient state capacity contributed to the agency's poor enforcement record. The federal bureaucracy was simply too small and inexperienced to successfully undertake large-scale reform of this scope. In the absence of governmental institutions capable of overseeing an industrial economy, the control of code boards defaulted to the very businessmen they were created to regulate.

State-centered explanations emphasize the structural and institutional environment in which reformers acted. Some historians have, however, sought to study more closely the ideas embraced by reformers themselves. While acknowledging that external constraints shaped reformers' ideas about political economy, Alan Brinkley, for example, focuses on a group of academics and policy makers who might be considered the architects of the New Deal. In so doing, he charts an important evolution within liberalism itself. In the late New Deal and the opening years of World War II, policy makers jettisoned earlier ambitious goals of economic planning and institutional regulation in favor of the limited goals of creating a healthy economic environment for capitalist institutions to operate. Once concerned with addressing the concentration of private economic power, rooted in antimonopoly thought, this group of chastened liberals instead promoted consumption and fiscal policy to promote broad economic growth. Consumption, not investment, they now argued, drove modern industrial economies. Therefore, public spending and the resulting increased mass purchasing power were the means to stimulate the economy. The outbreak of war in Europe and the goal of ensuring war production completed the narrowing of liberal ambition. By the end of the war, a new liberal consensus had emerged centered on economic growth, mass consumption, and individual rights.

Brinkley has since been joined by other scholars investigating the centrality of ideas about consumption to New Deal reformers. "Consumer politics," Meg Jacobs argues, was the common ground for the construction of new organizations, new coalitions, and ultimately new state institutions. The Wagner Act was a means to guarantee the right to organize and bargain collectively, but it won support because it empowered labor to increase its purchasing power. Landon Storrs investigates the domestic champions of consumer purchasing power, which she located in women activists and such organizations as the National Consumer's League, which sought to use consumption as a strategy to improve labor standards.

The problem of underconsumption, historians have told us, shaped New Dealers' understanding of the causes of the Great Depression. Nowhere, arguably, was this problem graver than in the agricultural sector. Programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act, regional planning experiments like the Tennessee Valley Authority, and other power distribution projects sought to rectify the imbalance between rural and urban areas and increase farm purchasing power. While a number of studies have investigated the rural programs of the New Deal, much more attention has gone toward exploring efforts to empower workers and secure recovery in

the industrial sector. In a groundbreaking study, Sarah Phillips interrogates the web of New Deal environmental policies and argues that conservation was at the heart of New Dealers' rising liberalism. Rural policy, whether through the government financed construction of hydroelectric dams, irrigation, the closing of the public domain, purchase of marginal farmland, technical assistance to end soil erosion, or rural electrification, added to earlier conservationist ideas a new set of concerns about social justice and redistribution. Her narrative charts the limits of this vision, the obstacles it encountered, and its demise during World War II when it conflicted with the demands of industrial output. Yet New Deal environmental policy had lasting legacies. It shaped the evolution of the modern state, planted the seeds for the emergent Sun Belt, and laid the roots for the modern environmental movement (according to Neil Maher's recent work).

Another recent study has emphasized a different New Deal policy area that had a long-range impact on economic development: public works. High levels of spending and unprecedented construction activity, Jason Smith argues, fueled a "public works revolution"—a transformation that laid the foundations of future prosperity, altered the nation's political landscape, and legitimized the Keynesian management of the economy, both intellectually and physically. The state, Smith suggests, used public works—schools, courthouses, post offices, roads, and other improvements—to significantly spur economic development. Public works funding, he emphasizes, also played a key role in building and solidifying the Democratic Party at federal, state, and local levels of government. It was effective both economically and politically.

To the continuing debate seeking to explain the New Deal's achievements and its limits, a generation of scholars attuned to questions of gender has added a new layer of interpretation. Alice Kessler-Harris, Gwendolyn Mink, Suzanne Mettler, and Linda Gordon have pointed out how much of the discourse of social provision was gendered. A "gendered imagination," in Kessler-Harris's words, shaped social policies such as social security and unemployment insurance. The two-tiered welfare state that emerged treated men and women unequally: White men benefited from the national standardized social entitlement programs such as old age insurance on the basis of economic citizenship, but supplemental welfare programs intended for mothers and children were administered by the states, which set their own eligibility requirements. That these programs did so was due not only to men's gendered visions, but also to the aspirations of women reformers themselves, as Linda Gordon emphasized. The New Deal, then, may not have done a good deal to advance feminist goals, but it did support an active female network in government agencies, as Gordon, Kristin Downey, and Susan Ware have reminded us. Many of these activists rooted in female reform networks advocated for special protections for women, rather than more abstract equal rights.

If a recent generation of scholars has focused attention on the gendered aspects of New Deal social policy, another group of scholars has called our

attention to its racial aspects. Mary Poole and Ira Katznelson, for example, have investigated the way racism and segregation influenced legislation. To accommodate southern Democrats in Congress, federal policies and programs were designed to protect white interests and advantages. Government interventions, such as social security and minimum wages, excluded agricultural and domestic workers, central occupations for African Americans. While ostensibly color-blind, New Deal legislation (and its decentralized administration that enabled regional and local discrimination) produced a massive preferential resource distribution to whites. Building on the influential work of Kenneth Jackson and Tom Sugrue, which charts the intersection between federal New Deal policy and postwar residential segregation, David Roediger has recently argued that New Deal housing policy helped to forge an “exclusion-based white nationalism.” If the New Deal institutionalized new patterns of discrimination and inequality, however, it also opened up spaces for African Americans in their struggle for equal rights. Harvard Sitkoff, indeed, has argued that it was during the New Deal that civil rights emerged as a national issue, an account supported by a host of subsequent studies on African Americans during the Depression and New Deal. Recent scholarship pointed out that where the 1930s did sow new spaces for black political struggle, it also witnessed a fragmentation of racial solidarity in the black community. Karen Ferguson’s investigation of the black elite response to the New Deal argues that many black reformers were willing to trade representation in New Deal program bureaucracies for the right to challenge the more discriminatory aspects of many of the programs.

In contrast, Patricia Sullivan, Robin Kelly, and Glenda Gilmore, among others, paid more attention to those within the African-American community who challenged the paradigms of southern discrimination and worked to link racial and economic justice. The Depression crisis created political space for new movements as diverse as the Communist Party and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. African Americans used these new institutional spaces, however fragile, to challenge the southern power structure. These studies emphasize the agency of African Americans in mobilizing for social change and the realities of repression and obstacles they faced.

Given the centrality of national politics to so many developments in the 1930s, it should not surprise us that so many of the studies discussed here focus on New Deal policy. During these “turbulent years,” however, ordinary workers managed a partial reconfiguration of power relations with an upsurge of labor militancy. A generation of historians has investigated their dynamic struggles at the grassroots and national levels. Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Zieger, among others, emphasize the remarkable accomplishments that were made in the 1930s with the rise of industrial unionism (even if later structural developments and mistakes contributed to labor’s increased impotence). Others, including Elizabeth Faue and Staughton Lynd, see the early 1930s as a “heroic spring” of organized labor and

lament the rise of bureaucratic organization in the later part of the decade. National structures, Faue emphasizes, marginalized women who had been central to an earlier community-based model of organizing. Lynd argues that “conservative” national leaders undercut a more radical, democratic unionism. These scholars locate labor’s much later demise in its failure to heed this “community-based vision” of the 1930s. They may, however, romanticize worker militancy, for, as Robert Zieger and Lizabeth Cohen remind us, pragmatic gains and, in Cohen’s words, a vision of a “moral capitalism” appealed to the bulk of ordinary rank-and-file industrial workers over more radical ideologies.

All scholars acknowledge the Communist Party’s important role in the labor upsurge of the 1930s. While Communists were small in number, they were influential as organizers. As Lizabeth Cohen, Robin Kelly, Ronald Schatz, Mary Triece, and Robert Zieger, among others, have argued, their presence contributed to progressive racial and gender egalitarianism. At the same time, Zieger reminds us that the party’s fealty to Moscow damaged the Popular Front, and, as Eric Arnesen contends, left a legacy of betrayal for African Americans. Robin Kelly seeks to sidestep the question of “Moscow machinations” in his history of the Alabama party. African-American members in Alabama forged a unique working-class radicalism that drew on the culture of the black masses and rural traditions of resistance. Glenda Gilmore’s grand narrative on the radical roots of civil rights similarly investigates the Communist Party as a critical force in an international freedom struggle that linked both race and class. Black radicals with an internationalist vision challenged white supremacy and economic injustice well before *Brown v. Board of Education*.

To these discussions of 1930s radicalism, Michael Denning’s magisterial work on the Popular Front reminds us that the Communist Party was but one agent in a broad social movement. The “Age of the CIO” created a left-wing alliance that flourished within a much larger bloc of the New Deal coalition. The organized left linked blue-collar workers to a new class of mass-culture workers whose aims were cultural as well as economic. The resulting “laboring of American culture,” Denning persuasively argues, outlived the demise of the Popular Front as a political movement and indelibly shaped American culture in the postwar years.

Many scholars have charted the flourishing radicalism of the period, but others, such as Alan Brinkley, remind us that dissidence took on more populist dimensions among lower-middle-class men and women attracted to demagogues such as Huey Long and Father Coughlin. Social historians, such as James Gregory, additionally, have enriched our understanding of the experiences of rural migrants in distinct settings from Oklahoma to California. Still others, including Joel Carpenter and Susan Currell have investigated shifts in popular culture and religion. Most recently, Gabrielle Esperdy, Linda Gordon, and Colleen McDannell have contributed to a deeper understanding of the people and innovative movements in art, architecture, and photography during the Depression years. Even here,

the significance of New Deal public policy innovations in shaping cultural mobilizations is in full evidence. For scholars who are interested in the intersection between society, politics, culture, and class, the interwar period offers rich avenues for further research.

This partial and selective investigation of a vast body of scholarship highlights the large cast of characters central to any full historical understanding of the United States during the interwar period. While historians have not lost sight of the significance of institutions, national politics, and policy makers as central sites of historical investigation (particularly for the New Deal period), we have come to better appreciate the importance of such diverse groups as consumers, radicals, ordinary workers, female reformers, and African Americans, among many others, in the making of the modern United States during its years of “tragedy and triumph.”

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