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Citer ce compte rendu

The Farmers Alliance, Knights, and ULP participated in forming the People’s Party. Formed in 1891, the Arkansas branch had a weak following if only because disenfranchisement was already law. Established third-party leaders were active through the decade, though. To the list of Populist grievances, they added opposition to convict leasing and the recently-passed Election Law. The national crisis triggered in May 1893 came as no surprise in Arkansas. Since the beginning of the decade, crop prices were falling and tension between farm workers and land-owners was rising (a strike by cotton pickers in Lee County, assisted by the Colored Farmers Alliance, was swiftly and violently crushed). Coal miners and railway workers dominated most strikes in the 1890s. Governor William Fishback sent militia units to Little Rock and Fort Smith, a furniture manufacturing centre. Meanwhile, President Grover Cleveland sent federal marshals to the state.

Despite “frustrations and failures,” there would be important impacts on subsequent state reforms and subaltern movements. (127) United Mine Workers’ locals became active in the 1890s. The Arkansas Socialist Party and a few Industrial Workers of the World locals were suppressed during World War I. The destruction of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union in the 1919 Elaine Massacre notwithstanding, Black Arkansans carried on practices of resistance from the 19th century. The Socialist-oriented Southern Tenant Farmers Union was formed in 1934.

Hild has consulted salient historiography for Arkansas’s Gilded Age. It complements a new essay collection on themes in southern labour history (Matthew Hild and Keri Leigh Merritt, eds. Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018]). Addressing conflicts about electoral politics, Hild notes that reality was more complicated than doctrinal arguments. He also deals with voter suppression and violence against newly elected officials and Blacks. He explains that the term Great Upheaval entailed the railway uprising of 1877 as well as strikes of the mid-1880s and 1894. Hild substantiates his arguments with census records, papers of contemporary labour leaders, and meeting minutes. The text is supplemented with primary documents and a map.

While Hild’s institutional emphasis perhaps cannot be helped given a possible dearth of resources in which to reconstruct the daily lives of common labourers, a few words of criticism are in order. Hild does not directly address how the Civil War affected perceptions Arkansas workers had of each other. Was the turbulent relationship between craft unionists and industrial workers in other regions of the country a defining issue in Arkansas’ working-class revolt? On balance, Hild’s monograph lends to a deeper understanding of the radical tradition among working people in Arkansas. It must also be remembered that this “tradition” arose in the not-too-distant past.

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appears ambitious for such a succinct discussion of the significant reforms and regulations enacted in the Great Depression under Franklin Roosevelt. The passage of the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) in 1935 has become a pivot for intense scholarly debates on the role of the state in supporting working-class aspirations with opinions diverging from championing the NLRA as the touchstone of legislative reform to denunciations that it was merely a scheme to entice working-class demobilization. Interpretations aside, the New Deal era represents the solitary effective period of progressive reform centred on the economic security of American working people. The obvious racial and gendered limitations of the 1930s–1970s interregnum notwithstanding, these interventions had tangible benefits for both unionized and unorganized citizens. Nostalgia for a revitalized version of the New Deal has long preoccupied many progressives and has only intensified with the further transgressions of neoliberalism, a rising nativist hostility towards immigrants, and the prospect of a US Supreme Court more rigidly reactionary than that which obstructed the 1930s-era Democrats. In a tersely-written analysis Cowie argues persuasively that there will be no contemporary New Deal variant as the cold-fusion of political and economic forces that came together for FDR will not be repeated. So, what may we learn of this “exceptional,” and “aberrant,” period between 1935 and 1973 that might instruct a more realistic strategy for our times?

It is useful, once again, to be provided with detailed evidence that the New Deal was broadly successful in ameliorating economic inequality from the Great Depression well into the late-20th century. The positive role of the state was dramatically in evidence with the 1933 inauguration of the FDR Democrats as the ensuing flurry of “alphabet agencies” which may not have transformed the nation as much as suspend disbelief in statist solutions. The Great Exception carefully reconstructs the confluence of political and social forces, from southern Dixiecrats to moderate Republicans, that advanced the New Deal. The persistent irritants of immigration and religious moralism were abated temporarily.

From this understanding, realizing this precisely balanced fulcrum would later totter appears inevitable. The longitudinal perspective does suggest the New Deal is framed by two gilded-age barriers. History makes clear reforms are not ratchet-like unidirectional but subject to destructive counterattack. Here, the narrative might have benefitted from the injection of more on the gathering formation of anti-progressive forces that would introduce not only the tremendously destructive Taft-Hartley Act by 1947, sidetrack Harry Truman’s Fair Deal postwar initiative, but also start to reframe a broad coalition of their own to roll back economic and political reforms. Without question, the New Deal’s liberal consensus had intrinsic instability, but it took decades of conservative fracking to split apart the constituent elements. In our times, a list of regressive alphabet agencies, including: ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), AFP (Americans for Prosperity), the Olin Foundation, Mackinac Center, Cato Institute, all channel dark money from donors resolutely determined to eliminate all traces of the New Deal. Further, the book could add more of Franklin Roosevelt, the man, as it was the president’s dynamism and sheer force of personality that propelled the message of this ambitious agenda. While FDR had many detractors, few leaders could have marshalled the necessary political support for such an interventionist platform. This was another key element of the “extraordinary” moment. Neither the
charisma of John F. Kennedy, the back-
room arm-twisting of Lyndon Johnson, 
nor the affable intellectualism of Barack 
Obama could yield similar results.

Despite the propensity of the progress-
ive left to inflict self-wounds, Cowie re-
jects arguments that the Cold War, civil 
rights, anti-Vietnam activism, gender or 
sexual-identity equality undermined the 
New Deal coalition. Rather, it was the 
bedrock ideologies of strident individual-
ism and anti-statist traditions that rallied 
to re-focus on anti-immigrant xenopho-
bia, unconstrained racism, and resur-
gent religion that rent asunder Franklin 
Roosevelt’s political project. Scholars 
of American history will hardly be sur-
prised at these conclusions; however, The 
Great Exception sets out these issues with 
admirable clarity.

While Jeff Cowie and colleague Nick 
Salvatore presented initial iterations of 
The Great Exception years prior to this 
2016 publication, events of the Trump 
presidency have reinforced the validity 
of their analyses. With each passing year 
the book seems ever more prescient. The 
recent Janus v. AFSCME decision impos-
ing right-to-work conditions on public-
sector unions and continuing assaults 
on Social Security, healthcare, and un-
documented immigrants have propelled 
the United States to a nadir of inequality 
not experienced since the Gilded Age. At 
a time when the deeply anti-intellectual 
paranoid style of American politics ap-
pears boundless it is Cowie’s analysis of 
historical specificity that clarifies the “par-
tial” and “temporary” nature of the 
New Deal reforms and helps map the way 
ahead.

Taking cues from Progressive Era so-
cial movements, Cowie joins with others 
suggesting that campaigns for large-scale 
federal labour reform are doomed. The 
entrenchment of the radical right sharply 
limits Congressional opportunities to 

enact legislative measures. The Obama 
Administration’s failure to deliver on the 
Employee Free Choice Act “card-check” 
initiative was symptomatic of diminished 
political will to resurrect any neo-New 
Deal coalition. As Thomas Frank has 
apty stated, Democrats have long ago 
turned away from working-class projects. 

The Great Exception concludes with 
a variation of the “what is to be done?” 
question. New forms of revitalization are 
necessary for organized labour. After a 
phase of understandable reticence about 
invoking strike action, unions have 
sprung ideological into action, even if 
goaded by the rank-and-file. If “damn 
the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” is not 
oficial dictum, the recent actions of red-
state teachers should remind us of how 
the New Deal first came about. Rather 
than a bestowment from patrician politi-
cians seeking to salvage capitalism from 
the turmoil of the Great Depression, 
concerted labour militancy, coupled 
with broad community support, lever-
aged the partial reforms represented in 
the Wagner Act and related measures. 
Cowie suggests some form of “alt-labor” 
may continue to offer the best pathway 
to move beyond the limitations of nativ-
ism and racism to re-focus on how eco-
nomic and social justice might overcome 
entrenched ideological divisions. To all 
the academic skeptics of the New Deal-
era labour reforms as overly legalistic and 
ultimately demobilizing the systematic 
campaigns to eliminate check-off/agency 
fees has required a return to face-to-face 
organizing replete with traditional union 
pins from dues-paid members. If that 
strategy proved foundational for the New 
Deal coalition then perhaps it may bring 
about its overdue successor. 

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