



THE RISE AND FALL OF THE NEW DEAL ORDER

1930-1980



EDITED BY

Steve Fraser AND Gary Gerstle

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*The Rise and Fall of the
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To Max and Danny

INTRODUCTION

WHEN Ronald Reagan assumed office in January of 1981, an epoch in the nation's political history came to an end. The New Deal, as a dominant order of ideas, public policies, and political alliances, died, however much its ghost still hovers over a troubled polity. *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* is thus intended as a historical autopsy. All of its contributors probe the mystery of how something so grandly complex as the New Deal order was born, then mastered a notoriously fractious country, and finally disintegrated. The question is a compelling one: the passions, bitterness, recriminations, and anxieties of our contemporary political life are all unthinkable except in reference to the politics, ideology, and morality that have come to be associated with the New Deal order.

The ten essays assembled here offer some startlingly new interpretations of the anomalies, ironies, and paradoxes that have long contributed to the mystery of the New Deal order: why the Great Depression lasted so long; how the Democratic party could simultaneously accommodate poor workers and wealthy capitalists in its coalition; why the 'labor question' lost its central importance in American politics almost from the day the labor movement finally achieved some enduring political power; how a liberalism so focused on issues of class inequality in the 1930s came to focus entirely on the issue of racial inequality in the 1960s; why economic abundance generated political and cultural conservatism in the 1950s and radicalism in the 1960s; and how the Democratic party managed to alienate, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, those constituents who had been its most diehard supporters.

In addition to their commitment to illuminating such basic questions in political history, the authors also share a particular generational experience. By and large they matured intellectually during the years when the Democratic party and its liberal agenda lost power and appeal. The witnessing of a political era's eclipse has imparted to many of these essays a sober and ironic tone, appropriate to political

analyses that stress missed opportunities, unintended consequences, and dangerous but inescapable compromises. Such a tone is a far cry from the celebration of the New Deal characteristic of those scholars, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Eric Goldman, who witnessed firsthand that remarkable and seductive burst of political energy in the mid-1930s.¹ It is equally distant from the condemnatory terms in which young, angry 1960s radicals like those who wrote for *Studies on the Left* cast the New Deal and modern liberalism.² The intellectual passions of the 1930s and 1960s took shape in a climate that assumed the political era ushered in by the New Deal would go on forever. Our sobriety reflects the fact that the era no longer lives; that it belongs, as it were, to history.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL ORDERS

The essays in this volume are arranged chronologically to follow the emergence, crystallization, and decomposition of a political order. Our notion of "political order" draws its conceptual inspiration from the notion of "electoral system" and "party system" developed by political scientists and the "new political historians" in recent years. These scholars have depicted American political history since 1800 in terms of relatively long periods of electoral stability punctuated by brief but intense political upheavals and electoral realignments. In each of the five periods of electoral stability (1800–1820s, 1820s–1850s, 1850s–1890s, 1890s–1930s, 1930s–1970s), the major parties had a fixed relationship to an electoral coalition; the size of the parties' respective coalitions, in turn, determined the relationship that prevailed between the two parties—in particular, whether one dominated or whether the two struggled on a relatively equal footing. Thus the fourth electoral system, ushered in by the crisis of the 1890s, made the Republican party the dominant one in national affairs for thirty-five years; and the fifth electoral system, ushered in by the Great Depression, brought the Democrats and their New Deal agenda to power for a period of about forty years.³

This approach diminishes the importance of particular political actors—presidents, senators, and others—as well as of the normal two-, four-, and six-year electoral cycles. It elevates, by contrast, the importance of economic events and social trends. Fundamental changes in political life—those which produce a change in party systems—are seen as issuing from crises in the nation's economy, social structure, and political culture. Thus the dissolution of the second party system of Whigs and Democrats in the 1850s was tied to irresolvable conflicts over slavery; the dissolution of the third-party sys-

tem in the 1890s occurred amid a devastating economic depression and fundamental challenges to capitalism embodied in the Populist and labor revolts of those years; and the collapse of the fourth-party system in the 1930s likewise reflected economic distress and political revolt.

In probing why such fundamental historical events are required to change party systems, the new political historians have generally offered "ethnocultural" explanations. American voters, at least from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, they have argued, viewed political parties as the protectors of their most treasured beliefs and vital interests: their religions, their ethnic traditions, their families and their neighborhoods. Voters thus developed profound emotional loyalties to parties; these loyalties, in turn, influenced individual electoral behavior far more than rational reflections on a party's platform or short-term, instrumental calculations of the likely return on casting a ballot for one party or another. Such loyalties were not easily forsaken. Only major economic and social crises triggered broad shifts in loyalty from one party to another.⁴

The dominance of the Democratic party and its liberal agenda in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s is inconceivable apart from the emotional bond tying millions of voters—especially Catholic and Jewish voters climbing out of their big-city ghettos in the North—to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. The nature of that emotional bond is an issue that a number of essays in this volume investigate. But other essays explore the economic elites, policy-making networks, and political ideologies and programs that shaped the distribution of power and influenced the era's political character. It is precisely these elites, programs, and ideologies—factors in the nation's political life that students of electoral systems have tended to neglect—that our term "political order" is meant to encompass.⁵ The New Deal order never operated with the kind of precision and effortlessness implied by a word like "system"; but it did possess an ideological character, a moral perspective, and a set of political relationships among policy elites, interest groups, and electoral constituencies that decidedly shaped American political life for forty years.

The New Deal Political Order: Emergence and Crystallization, 1929–1960

Thomas Ferguson's opening essay focuses on the economic elite whose power, money, and ambition were crucial to the reelection of Roosevelt in 1936 and to the long-term dominance of the New Deal political order. Members of this elite shared two characteristics: first,

they were located in capital-intensive sectors of American industry where labor costs formed a relatively small part of overall expenditures; and, second, they dominated their industries in international trade. These economic circumstances allowed these capitalists to tolerate prolabor legislation on the one hand and to demand an international policy of free trade on the other. They were the ones who occupied the "backrooms" of Roosevelt's administration of 1935–36, supplying policymakers to draft the National Labor Relations Act and Social Security Act and to engineer the New Deal's sudden turn from economic nationalism to free trade.

Ferguson explains why this "industrial bloc" first broke off from the united business community that had coalesced behind McKinley in 1896 and then "realigned" itself with the Democratic party. He reconstructs the private world of money, policy, and partisanship that is so central a part of modern American politics. In the process of this reconstruction, he dispels the persistent and popular myth that the business community was monolithic in its attitude toward the New Deal. He shows how labor and a portion of capital can coexist—and simultaneously pursue their interests—in the same political party. And, finally, he renders comprehensible why the second New Deal was so politically different from the first, and why the political solutions embodied in those 1935 reforms—unlike those of 1933—endured.

Michael A. Bernstein's essay examines another persistent riddle about the Great Depression, namely, why it lasted far longer than any other cyclic downturn in American history. His explanation hinges on the unique coincidence of a cyclic downturn with a fundamental secular transition. The 1929 crash occurred at a time when investment dynamism had already shifted to such new consumer-driven industrial and commercial sectors as food processing, mass retailing, household appliances, medical care, and recreation; but the cumulative size of these new sectors, in terms of investment activity and employment, was simply too small in the 1930s to lead an overall economic recovery. Thus, even as firms in these sectors quickly recovered their sales, investors, and profitability, they could not overcome the drag imposed on the economy by those old sectors, like primary metals, textiles, and lumber, that still accounted for such large shares of national output and employment. Had the panic of 1929 occurred at a later point in this secular transition, when the new sectors had added some heft to their lean, energetic frames and the old sectors had shrunk to a size more befitting their advanced age, the trauma of a decade-long depression might well have been averted.

Bernstein deepens Ferguson's argument that divisions within the

business community are crucial to an adequate understanding of the politics of the depression years. One would expect entrepreneurs of the newer consumption-oriented industries to have been drawn to specific sorts of political strategies reflecting their firms' economic resiliency and their buoyant faith in a bountiful future. And, as Steve Fraser points out in his essay on the 'labor question,' this was indeed the case. Mass merchandisers, urban real-estate developers, clothing, appliance, and office goods manufacturers—and their banking, trade union, and intellectual allies—formed, as early as the 1920s, a proto-Keynesian elite eager to use the state to stimulate consumption, to redistribute income, and even to intervene in financial and labor markets. Such state policies, they believed, would trigger a revival of production and thus the return of prosperity. This vision had already attracted (by the mid-1920s) such political reformers as Louis Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, labor leaders like Sidney Hillman, and industrial relations experts like William Leiserson and Morris Cooke. And when the Great Depression convulsed the world of politics, discrediting the policies of reigning elites and quickening the movement of "new immigrants"—especially its working-class component—for full political and social enfranchisement, this new political elite saw its opportunity and seized a portion of state power. Members of this elite were both the architects and the administrators of that famed New Deal welfare state that had taken shape by 1937: a rambling collection of state agencies, including the Departments of Labor and Interior, the Works Projects Administration, the National Labor Relations Board, the National Resources Planning Board, the Rural Electrification Agency, and the Federal Reserve.

This momentous political development was laced with irony and ambiguity. The more this new elite and its labor movement allies succeeded in their goals, the more workers would find themselves integrated into a mass consumer society and stripped of a specific class identity. On the other hand, this "mass consumption" coalition encountered opposition, even in the 1930s, on all sides: from conservative sectors of the labor movement; from the South; from old sectors of capital and their banking allies; from small businessmen. And then the severe recession of 1937 challenged the very legitimacy of the New Deal itself, provoking a far-reaching reevaluation of the political project that New Deal policymakers had so confidently undertaken.

That reevaluation—and its consequences for American politics—are the subjects of Alan Brinkley's essay "The New Deal and the Idea of the State." Focusing on the ideological and political disarray in Roosevelt's administration in 1937, he does not discern the kind of

programmatic coherence that Fraser and Ferguson argue characterized the New Deal political elite by 1936. In Brinkley's eyes, ideological eclecticism rather than coherence characterized the New Deal from 1932 through 1936. The political and economic pressures of 1937, however, forced New Dealers—such men as Alvin Hansen, Marriner Eccles, Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickes, Thurman Arnold, and Henry Wallace—to articulate and defend their ideological vision. Such pressure yielded two quite different visions, one calling on the state to regulate capitalist institutions and the other calling on the state merely to stimulate economic growth through the use of fiscal and monetary powers. Brinkley labels the first vision “regulatory” and the second “Keynesian”; and he shows how the Keynesian vision gradually, but firmly, in the years 1937 to 1945, pushed the regulatory vision from the corridors of power. Above all, the experience of war—and especially a revived faith in capitalism which that experience engendered—secured, in Brinkley's view, the ascendancy of the Keynesian over the regulatory approach.

Brinkley's argument that Keynesianism triumphed only in the 1940s seems to contradict Fraser's claim that it already reigned in 1936. But the contradiction is more semantic than real, reflecting the significantly different meanings that the two authors impute to Keynesianism. Keynesianism, in Brinkley's eyes, signified the use of the state's fiscal and monetary powers to maintain a healthy macro-economic environment. Keynesianism, in Fraser's eyes, involved extensive intervention by the state in capital, labor, and consumer markets—to the point of regulating corporate business practices and of assigning the state the role of employer, builder, and (on rare occasions) manufacturer. What made both these approaches Keynesian was their shared goal of using the state to stimulate consumption and to distribute the fruits of capitalism on an ever greater scale. But the markedly different means each espoused for achieving those goals necessarily tied Keynesianism to two very different kinds of political programs. Following the useful lead of Theda Skocpol and Margaret Weir, we might label the New Dealers' more radical, regulatory program “social Keynesianism,” and their more conservative, fiscal-oriented program “commercial Keynesianism.”⁶ We could then suggest that the regulatory approach favored by many New Dealers in 1936 and 1937 was a form of social Keynesianism that fell into eclipse during the war years as advocates of a commercial Keynesianism won the key battles within the policy and party elites for control of the American state. Such a perspective would underscore the importance of Keynesian thinking from the late 1930s on, while allowing for the dramatic 1940s change in state policies emphasized by Brinkley.

Nelson Lichtenstein demonstrates in his essay "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining" that proponents of social Keynesianism, though confined by the early 1940s to the progressive wing of the labor movement and the "left-liberal" wing of the Democratic party, doggedly carried on their battle for political power (and the control of the state that such power bestowed). Labor movement progressives like Walter Reuther and Philip Murray and their left-liberal allies in the Democratic party discerned in the structure and operation of such wartime agencies as the War Labor Board and Office of Price Administration a model of democratic, national planning—what Lichtenstein calls corporatism—that could be applied to a reconverted peacetime economy. Almost all the planning ideas involved securing for American workers full employment, high wages, and adequate welfare provisions. They drew their ultimate justification from the stimulus that such a welfare state would give capitalism through the dramatic expansion in levels of personal consumption. When their efforts to introduce such social democratic notions were rebuffed first by corporate titans like General Motors and then by an increasingly conservative Democratic party, the labor progressives sought to build their economic and political strength. They launched "Operation Dixie," a campaign to organize Southern workers, and they mobilized support for the formation of a truly "progressive" political party. "Operation Dixie" foundered on racism, while their third-party efforts—though yielding Henry Wallace's Progressive party—succumbed to cold war passions. Only in 1948 and 1949 did labor progressives relinquish their corporatist dreams and accept the political solution forced on them: the pursuit of economic security through a private, depoliticized system of collective bargaining. Only then did social Keynesianism drop entirely out of American politics.

Brinkley's and Lichtenstein's essays both force us to treat the 1940s, rather than the 1930s, as the politically formative years of the New Deal order. Only in the mid-to-late 1940s did the fate of modern liberalism come to depend on the successful operation of a high-consumption capitalist economy; only in those years did commercial Keynesians, those policymakers who wanted to exercise only the fiscal and monetary powers of the state, gain dominance in the Democratic party and over the state's administrative structure. The creation of this political economy was a wrenching political experience, lasting more than fifteen years and involving mammoth conflicts, not simply between workers and capitalists but between different blocs of capitalists and between contending groups of policymakers. And even in 1950, this political economy had not overcome all sources of resistance. The South still stood outside these new economic arrange-

ments, as did many poor who had to survive in a haphazard welfare system. The incomplete integration of the South and the poor meant, of course, the incomplete integration of American blacks; it meant that race would necessarily loom larger and larger in American politics.

Those Americans who were fully integrated into this political economy—the unionized sectors of the working class and the rapidly expanding ranks of securely employed, well-paid, white-collar workers—found themselves surrounded by lush advertising images of the private satisfactions to be gained from spending and consuming. The definition of the good life that was thus implied—stressing the superiority of leisure to work, of individual expressiveness to social solidarity, and of private, family life to public, civic life—long antedated the 1950s. As Steve Fraser notes in his ‘labor question’ essay, the extension of mass production and scientific management techniques to ever greater sectors of American industry in the decade of World War I had thoroughly transformed the world of work and play. The skilled craftsman who found justification in work for his very essence had become, by 1930, an endangered species; so too had the unskilled laborers whose abysmal working conditions had aroused such political anxiety about the capacity of capitalist society to deliver a decent life to wage earners. In their places arose a new kind of worker, the semiskilled operative, whose modicum of skill commanded some respect and whom employers strenuously tried to accclimate to the hierarchical, bureaucratic character of the modern workplace. These workers, who formed the natural constituency for the *CIO*, found their political voice during the New Deal years. They demanded that their workplaces be governed by an enlightened rule of law and that employers respect the workplace rights that their unions had established; but, lacking the autonomy and skill that had made work the central element of the nineteenth-century craftsman’s identity, they increasingly sought personal satisfaction not in “workers control” but in the glittering array of goods and entertainments made available by the marketplace. By 1950, millions of these unionized workers had won the job security and wage levels necessary to participate fully in the consumer marketplace; so too had the growing masses of white-collar, corporate workers.

Elaine Tyler May’s essay “Cold War—Warm Hearth” explores this unprecedented mass focus on consumption as well as the “peculiar,” family-centered form it took in the 1950s. The consumption mania of the 1950s—homes, cars, TVs, hi-fis, nylon stockings, and “bar-b-q” grills—has long been regarded as a central feature of post-World War II culture. What has remained somewhat obscure is why

this wave of consumption should have focused so much on home and family. May argues that Americans seized on home and family life for two interrelated sets of reasons. First, the highly organized and bureaucratized character of work life—true for both blue- and white-collar workers—made home life seem correspondingly individualized and free. Second, the cumulative shock of depression, world war, cold war, and the threat of nuclear annihilation inclined individual Americans to forsake the frightening public world of politics for the comforting and secure private world of family. Suburbanization—and the breakup of familiar communities and extended kin networks that it implied—ensured that the *nuclear* family would become the focus for this private life; so did the new “scientific” gospel on the expressive and liberating possibilities inherent in family life. Middle-class Americans relied heavily on professional expertise, especially on the psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors who promised to help them become more expressive, in sexual and other ways, with their marriage partners.

For all these reasons, the 1950s apotheosis of home and family cannot be considered a triumph for traditional values. To the contrary, the emphases on consumption, scientific expertise, and personal and individual expressiveness all underscore the essentially modernist and secularist character of 1950s private life—at least for those participating in the economy of abundance and consumerism. This modernist version of private life may be viewed as an intrinsic part of the New Deal order. Its emphasis on consumption made it an integral part of the nation’s mass production economy; its glorification of individual expressiveness in the family compensated for the impersonality of public life; and its infatuation with professionals and scientific expertise partook of the same rationalist, hierarchical principles driving state social and economic policy.

This “fit” between 1950s public and private life was hardly perfect. The espousal of modernist values in private life would generate enormous anxieties among husbands and wives, parents and children, as they strove to fulfill, often unsuccessfully, their hopes for individual expressiveness within a traditionalist, patriarchal form of family organization. Substantial numbers of families, moreover, located especially in the rural and small-town South and Midwest and in urban, ethnic districts of the Northeast, resisted the modernist code of May’s middle-class suburban families, and cleaved instead to a traditionalism rooted in Protestant or Catholic spiritual codes. Some briefly found a political voice in Joseph McCarthy’s attacks on the Eastern Establishment, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism. Still, those who found their search for individual expressiveness blocked or who

clung to traditionalist codes discovered few political outlets for their dissatisfactions. They were marginal players in the political arena defined by the New Deal order.

The New Deal Political Order: Decline and Fall, 1960–1980

No single event undermined the New Deal order; no particular individual, or even group of individuals, dug its grave. Decay began to set in as a result of growing gaps between what the New Deal order promised its constituents—in terms of citizenship rights, affluence, individual expressiveness, and a stable international order under American auspices—and what it actually delivered. A gap emerged first in the early 1960s in regard to the disenfranchised and poverty-stricken status of American blacks; another appeared in the moral turbulence and growing drain of international military commitments on domestic prosperity occasioned by the Vietnam War; and a third and related gap appeared in middle-class youth's alienation from the highly organized, bureaucratized character of the New Deal order that, they felt, stifled their quest for authenticity and individuality. Political tensions began to accumulate as result. These tensions were aggravated by the often vacillating and halfhearted efforts of Democratic party elites to make good on the promises of equality and opportunity so essential to the legitimacy of their political order. At some point in the 1960s and early 1970s, each smoldering tension would trigger a political explosion. The cumulative effects of such explosions would shatter the Democratic party as a majority party and discredit its liberal doctrines. By the mid-1970s, as a result, the New Deal political order had ceased to exist.

The mobilization of American blacks in the greatest movement for racial equality since Reconstruction is a well-told and -analyzed story that we do not recount in this volume.⁷ But that story forms the essential backdrop to Ira Katznelson's essay "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?" Katznelson subjects to careful examination Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1969 contention that the Johnson Administration squandered an "immense [political] opportunity" offered it by the civil rights movement: namely, to pass a full employment and incomes maintenance program that would have permanently solved the problem of American poverty. In Katznelson's eyes, such a program would have required the Democratic party to adopt European-style social democratic policies calling for extensive state interventions in labor and income markets. Such a social democratic turn was simply not possible in the 1960s. The reason, Katznelson argues, lies not in some fundamental, timeless antithesis between American political culture and social democratic ideas; it lies instead in the closing

off in the 1940s of a social democratic initiative that the left wing of the New Deal and progressive elements of the labor movement had nurtured since the mid-1930s.

Katznelson furthers Brinkley's and Lichtenstein's argument that the 1940s were watershed years in modern American political life. Not only did those years encompass the triumph of commercial Keynesianism and the transformation of the labor movement from a social democratic insurgency into a mere interest group; they encompassed as well the substitution of race for class as the great, unsolved problem in American life. These 1940s transformations decisively shaped and limited the social programs of the 1960s. Policymakers of the 1960s, influenced by an economics profession committed to commercial Keynesian doctrines, would not contemplate extensive state interferences in capital and labor markets. The labor movement showed little inclination to use the War on Poverty to raise fundamental questions about the distribution of income and power in American society. As a result of the labor movement's timidity on the one hand and the growing force of the civil rights movement on the other, the War on Poverty became entirely associated with the problems of black Americans. Katznelson admires the inventiveness and boldness of Great Society policymakers in pushing the limits of the ideological framework in which they operated. But he also stresses the futility of their task. They could not possibly have solved the problem of poverty—black or white—without more extensive state controls of capitalist institutions and markets. And their inability to challenge the increasingly popular view that the Great Society was meant to aid only black Americans would soon stir up resentment against the Democratic party among poor and working-class whites.

Tensions within the Democratic party over the issues of poverty and race had already become apparent during the halcyon days of 1960s prosperity. They became much more serious as the costs of defending the "free world" and, in particular, of fighting the Vietnam War began to force cutbacks in domestic social spending. The growing European and Japanese challenge to American economic superiority further strained the nation's resources and began generating a string of economic woes, many of which to this day remain unsolved: inflation, declining investment and productivity, unmanageable budget deficits, and negative trade balances. In political terms, these pressures called into question two economic principles central to the New Deal order: first, that consumer capitalism's benefits were to be extended to ever greater numbers of Americans; and, second, that the state, through its fiscal and monetary powers, was to stimulate the production and distribution of economic abundance.

This brewing racial-economic crisis, on its own, would probably have been sufficient to undermine the New Deal order. But an assault on this order and its majority party came from a cultural source as well—middle-class youth who began rejecting the materialism, consumerism, and familial-based personal life that were so central to the New Deal order's definition of the "good life." This cultural revolt and the ways in which it fueled, in the 1960s, a radical student movement intent on eliminating racism, poverty, technocracy, and imperialism from American life form the subjects of Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin's essay "The Failure and Success of the New Radicalism."

Isserman and Kazin root the student revolt in the stultifying character of 1950s private life. Told by the purveyors of mass culture and mass consumption that "a time of unending affluence and total freedom of choice was at hand," the young sought to experience a wide range of activities and to explore all aspects of their individuality. Above all, they sought "authenticity." Though the young cast this revolt in generational terms—as a revolt against their parents—their search for authenticity bears a striking resemblance to the search for personal expressiveness that Elaine Tyler May argues was so central to the family lives of the parents themselves. Seen from this perspective, the children may have been espousing an expanded, radicalized version of their own parents' values; 1950s domesticity, with its rhetorical emphasis on personal freedom, may have been the nursery of 1960s rebellion.

The younger generation's inclination to cast themselves in opposition to their parents was therefore deeply ironic. It also triggered momentous upheavals in both private and public life. The young rejected a host of values associated with 1950s adult, married life: the dogged pursuit of economic security, sexual monogamy, and, ultimately, patriarchy. Carrying the search for authenticity into all areas of public life—universities, corporations, government—the young produced a radical attack on the bureaucratic, hierarchical, and rationalist principles that underlay production and politics in the New Deal order.

In a cynical age, this radical disaffection might have developed along nihilist or narcissistic lines. But the moral awakening spawned by the cold war made many young people eager to join a crusade to save their society from the hypocritical practices—especially the tolerance of racism and poverty at home and the support of right-wing dictators abroad—that so compromised American democratic ideals. Isserman and Kazin analyze the emergence and collapse of this radical movement from the hopeful days of the civil rights protests,