American Studies Journal

Number 44

Winter 1999/Spring 2000

Social Policy and Welfare Reform in the United States

ISSN: 1433-5239

discerning mind at work on them, but because their absence inevitably shapes his interpretation. While his claims about the continuities between the Progressive Era and the 1930s are convincing, his marginalization of the "women's welfare state" and delayed attention to race leads him to overemphasize the European roots of certain New Deal ideas while neglecting the racialized, gendered paradigm that the indigenous politics of the earlier period also cast over this remarkable body of legislation. His privileging of transatlantic over indigenous factors also causes him to overstate the discontinuities between the New Deal and postwar social politics.

Finally, while Rodgers is no doubt right that World War II and the Cold War sent the transatlantic exchange into eclipse, I would argue that it did not disappear entirely. Though not terribly viable politically, it continues now in the fields of comparative historical sociology and comparative policy history—fields to which Atlantic Crossings is a major contribution. With its wealth of documentation, methodological innovations, and historiographical challenges, this fine book will not only add new rigor and richness to the field, but it bids fair to inaugurate a new chapter in the ongoing history of the transatlantic exchange.

Atlantic Crossings: Close Encounters, of What Kind?

by Victoria de Grazia
Columbia University

Daniel Rodger's book emphasizes the supply side as opposed to the demand side of social reform. It foregrounds the press of new ideas and experiments circulating through the North Atlantic world as giving rise to reformist impulses as opposed to the pressures from below arising from social struggles, the collective awakening to notions of social risks, or the implacable drive on the part of aggressive nation-states to engage in hygienizing bio-politics; all of the latter are arguments that European historians of similar phenomena have advanced to explain the origins and character of early twentieth century social reform movements. Vigorous if a bit ingenuous, serendipitous and piecemeal, the U.S. reform movement, as it is characterized here, ultimately seems very distant from the projects of capitalist reform in Europe. This is notwithstanding that it drew so insistently upon them as an inspiration.

Appalachian mountaineers in front of a cafe in Pikesville, Tennessee. Many unemployed people during the Depression could do nothing but wait for better times to come.

We might debate whether the supply of ideas is as crucial to reformist undertakings as Rodgers makes out here. We could also discuss whether he adequately addresses the paradox of why American reform, which appeared to be converging with the European then diverged from it. Irrespective, he convincingly shows how much contact there was among turn-of-the-century critics of market society and how important this cross-Atlantic circuit was to the education of American reformers.

My own queries turn here on two issues related to this traffic in ideas and institutions. My first question regard Rodgers' characterization of the cross-national terrain over which it moved. The second one regards his interpretation of how this traffic was received in milieu so very distant from the original place of conception. These same issues arise, though from a very different vantage point when, in the wake of World War I, continental Europe began to face the challenge of American models of market culture. Sweeping over the old problematic of capitalist reform, this U.S. wave of social invention carried with it notions such as the worker's right to a "decent standard of living," conceived in the American sense as income-driven and satisfied by mass consumption goods. This would eventually become, if not hegemonic, at least very influential in European reformist currents aligned with the United States post-World War II.

More generally, a study of institutional transfers like this raises what is perhaps the foremost problem comparativists address, namely, why innovations appear more or less simultaneously and with common features in what might seem like different contexts, and why, over the longer term, such

innovations could produce drastically different outcomes. In his famous 1928 essay on the comparative method, Marc Bloch, basing his examples on the spread of the feudal system, suggests three possibilities: namely, that commonalities across different cultures could be explained by virtue of originating in a shared mode of production, such as industrial capitalism, by having a common original source of dissemination (like all cowboy movies coming from Hollywood, or by performing analogous functions, assuming that all societies act according to similar logics.)

The key move for comparativists if they want to argue on behalf of the first possibility, which is that the reform movements that bind Americans and Europeans arise out of the same dynamic capitalism, which Rodgers seems indeed inclined to argue, would lie in characterizing the broad historical context in which they occurred. However, Rodgers' characterization strikes me as unconvincing, what he labels the North Atlantic "field of force." True, the U.S. and Europe were both subject similarly to the intensification of market relations, prodigious urbanization, and rising working class resentments. Still, the movement of reform across the Atlantic from east to west, then reversing from west to east, might just as well be understood if the Atlantic area were treated not as placid waters, open to traffic hither and yon, but as the eye of the hurricane of a conflictual global capitalist world-system. If the North Atlantic is viewed as a site of rising and declining hegemonies—passing through two catastrophic wars that would shake Europe from its global leadership and annihilate classical liberal visions of progressive reform—certain features of Rodger's analysis stand in sharper relief.

The first is periodization. World War I should be underscored as a real turning point. Before that, Europe's attractiveness is indeed very great. Afterward, the U.S. and the USSR emerged as the main poles of social invention. Before the War, Germany and Britain competed mightily for primacy in the field of reform as in other endeavors, and American reformers, as Rodgers documents, established a special relationship with German reformers at Halle, Leipzig, and other university centers and especially around the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* at Berlin, the young Americans sharing with their German professors and contemporaries a common interest in neo-mercantilist political economy suited to big (and closed) national markets and a common distaste for the tired Manchesterism and imperial high-handedness of the British. After the war, German statism was indelibly associated with the Kaiser's warmongering, and German reformism tinged with the menace of bolshevism. Before the war, nationalism and liberal reformism could coexist. After the war, nationalist ideologies were incorporated into right-wing authoritarian programs and Fascist corporatism presented itself as a new "third way" toward reform, and its positions on demographic policy, maternity and child care, as well as leisure, enjoyed great influence within international reform circles, among their U.S. participants as well.

If we see the Atlantic as an arena of competing and uneven development, the relationship of national and internationalism acquires a different salience from the relatively open and progressive world Rodgers portrays. Though ideas did indeed crisscross national frontiers and were nurtured in international congresses by cosmopolitan minds, reform was essentially a nationalizing, if not nationalistic phenomenon. The passage of social reform legislation was an element of competition among national states, its implementation a factor of national redemption, its contribution to improving the human factor calculated more or less scientifically in national accounts on wages, fertility, pensions, public health and migration. Paradoxically, the very implementation of reform on a national basis acted as an element of national cohesion, working not only against the internationalism of the labor movement but also against the cosmopolitanism of progressive ideas. Foreign examples might spur innovation. But their foreign nature, whether that was characterized as statist, authoritarian, socialistic, or other, could just as easily obstruct it.

My second point regards the institutionalization of ideas generated in such a freighted broader context. Globalization has engendered a vast literature on the "contests of interpretation" unleashed by cross-national encounters. Rodgers speaks of a "fluid politics of borrowing" (249), and in his forceful conclusion of the "expanded world of social-political referents and solutions (that) made politics out of mere economic fate"(508). What I miss in this vast canvas of the cross-Atlantic politics of citation is a sense of the discursive power, the fraught processes of inclusion and exclusion that are suggested in notions of "identity formation," "creolization," "dialogical encounter," or "hybridization," just to mention a few terms commonly used in such studies. Not much is necessarily gained from new-fangled borrowing from anthropology, linguistics, or social psychology the old-fashioned empiricist might say. But something surely is to be said for heightened awareness that a nuanced and systematic assessment of cultural-institutional transfers is very problematic, all the more so when real issues of translation are involved.

One problem whose answer eluded me here is the degree to which experiments from Europe did actually set terms of debate and/or shape alternatives. We know from European responses to the challenge

of post-war U.S. models of production that experts were in effect forced to debate whether high productivity necessarily went hand in hand with out-of-control consumption and rationalized kitchens would necessarily engender unmanageable American-style housewives. We know that sooner or later non-anglophone Europeans, the overwhelming majority, in the process of adopting new words like "service" and "marketing" had to assimilate whole new conceptual relationships. To what degree, say, did German social reformist ideas, imbricated as they were with statism, solidaristic ideas of market, sharp class hierarchies, or social radicalism, reshape the meaning of "social"? The answer might well be that Americans relatively speedily suppressed the original frame of reference, eliminating the foreign and alien far speedier than Europeans could expurgate the American influence. The near-total erasure of the German intellectual influence not just from the public, but also from the academic collective memory is in itself stunning testimony to this capacity.

The issue of appropriation takes us back to Rodgers' description of American experimentation as eclectic, local, even innocent or at least ingenuous. This is of a piece with his overall negative view of the propensity in the U.S. to marry reform to commercial capitalism, unlike Europe, where reform was allegedly solidly wedded to social democracy (408). The fact is that by the interwar period, progressive reformism was everywhere in crisis, and mass consumer-oriented capitalism presented itself as a strikingly rich vein of reform in the face of cutbacks of state provision, vast unemployment, and the pinched notions of workers' lives that prevailed in reformist circles. It is also true that in some measure all reform in the Atlantic area was piecemeal until after World War II when the Atlantic markets reopened, stabilized, and grew strongly under U.S. hegemony, and indigenous social-democratic and Catholic social-market ideas were wedded to American models of production and consumption.

Above all what I learned from Rodger's erudition is that Americans were quick learners. The cosmopolitanism of turn-of-the century reformers was an important contribution to American ascendancy. The eclecticism of their style of appropriation and the intensely local way in which reform was practiced far from making the U.S. marginal to the mainstream, contributed to the social inventiveness that would lend so much dynamism to the U.S.'s informal empire over the next three-quarters of the century.

If, to conclude, we recognize that the U.S.' old strength came from making connections abroad, from going outside to acquire "a spark of philosophy," what does it say now for U.S. leadership that American elite culture is so scornful of social reform abroad? If it is not oblivious to it, the attitude today toward the giant mixing bowl of projects and measures of the European Union - around leisure, job training, gender parity, child care — is "been there, done that." Under the new world order, the level playing field is the name of the game, and the only arbiter of public policy seems to be consumer choice and opinion polling, expressed in American, please.

A Tale of Pendular Times

by Pierre-Yves Saunier
CNRS, Lyon

In our research, we mention too often the existence of a "foreign model"—German, Spanish or Chinese, according to circumstances—to explain a new set of governmental measures, a new artistic trend, a new way of writing novels or a new social movement in the country we study. Like a *deus ex machina*, the "foreign model" comes unmediated, miraculously unwrapped, as neat as when it left its point of departure. But ideas, values, skills, words or visions of the world are not manufactured products, packaged and shipped in containers. Daniel Rodgers urges us to wrestle with a whole set of arguments to deal with this international commerce.

He shows us how to consider the indigenous circumstances, which shape each model's creation and its legitimization abroad as something worth importing. Here, his insistence on the subtleties of the rhetoric of backwardness is especially valuable. He points to the necessity to pay attention to the shipping crate in which ideas traveled, the circumstances of the journey, the points of arrival and departure. Above all, he reminds us that no Atlantic crossing left the ideas unchanged, and that importation (of words, ideas, policies, laws) means translation and reappropriation. His careful analysis of what happened to several social policies of "foreign" origin also underlines how the context of the importing country matters in understanding what comes out of the importation process.

I want to concentrate on two points that repeatedly occurred to me while I was reading the book as a "participating reader" who had to face some of the same questions and choices that Rodgers faced. The first is about a choice he made to privilege printed material and inter-individual connections, rather than the structures that framed these contacts. It is a choice that has produced tremendously interesting results, but that also leaves us with many opportunities. The second is about the geographical focus of Rodgers' study and raises questions about the difficulties in doing the kind of "world history" that he has attempted.

Considering the prominent resources of Daniel Rodgers, it seems to me that he has made two major choices among the vast possibilities that were open to him. The first choice was to focus on the role of individuals in the Atlantic connection. This choice produced detailed and fascinating accounts of the energy, skill and faith of the progressives. By focussing on such individuals as Richard Ely, Albert Shaw, Frederic Howe, Florence Kelley, Charles McCarthy, Elwood Mead, Edith Elmer Wood and Catherine Bauer, Rodgers gives us a thick description of how American international idea brokers discovered Europe, interpreted it and tried to bring back the best of its social achievements.

More importantly, Rodgers deliberately left out a closer examination of all the structures that organized the "world in between." Ideas and models often cross the pages of *Atlantic Crossings*, but we certainly need to know more about the specific rules, constraints, and the work of congresses and exhibitions; of the structured connections created by the socialists, the catholics or the protestants; of the quests organized by U.S. federal structures, such as the Bureau of Labor, or by reformers and business societies, such as the National Civic Federation or the Chambers of Commerce; and of the action of organizations, such as the Institute of Educational Travel. As Rodgers points out, the "market of connections" became more and more organized in the 1930s, but even before that it seems to me that the choices an individual could make, and the things that he could carry home with him, were not free of all organizational constraints and concerns. Among these constraints were "societies" that specialized in the international trade of social policies, and managed the definition of what was possible to import. For example, Paul Kellog's *Survey* led a conscious campaign to give Americans their "marching orders from the older civilization to the new" (267).

There were many agencies with this kind of organized will to develop connections. Among them were the foundations, a world of their own with their staff and programs. Rodgers mentions the Oberlander Trust that specialized on Germany, the American-Scandinavian Fund, and also the "golden donors," such as the Russell Sage, the Carnegie and the Rockefeller Foundations. But they only appear when he tells the story of an individual trying to get some funding. Nowhere are they considered in light of their structures and the framing effect they might have had on American connections with Europe.

For sure, the main concerns of the big foundations can be said to have been child care, public health, the peace movement or the social sciences, but I suspect that their size and power shaped the way the Atlantic connection worked even outside of these specialties. As far as the Rockefeller Foundation is concerned, this seems to be especially true for the New Deal period, since the people connected with the "1313 Center" and the Rockefeller philanthropies were major figures of the brain trust and the new federal agencies. It was Daniel Rodgers' right to leave the philanthropies outside of his already-rich landscape. It will be the duty of others to bring them back into the picture with the other structures that consciously organized the Atlantic connection.

One reason why Rodgers left the structures out may have to do with his second major choice, working with printed sources rather than with archives. Private papers are almost the only archival pieces he uses, and with great parsimony. I would have expected more use of journals such as John Ihlder's about the study tour he directed in 1914 for the National Housing Association, or a deeper analysis of the papers left by transatlantic travellers, such as John Nolen, in order to have a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of U.S. tours of Europe, or of the meaning and consequences of having personal contacts with European reformers. Daniel Rodgers chose to privilege the public writings arena by U.S. idea brokers, rather than the elements documenting the process of brokering, its limits and components. That is very coherent with his aims, his priority being to describe what has been brought from Europe, and how the importers tried to change matters on the other side of the Atlantic. Doing this, he also urges us to contribute to the puzzle he has begun to assemble.

Nevertheless, this preference for printed materials might have other consequences, as a result of the emphasis Rodgers places on Germany and Great-Britain. Germany and the United Kingdom are the salient points of the geography of exchanges, flows and importations drawn by the book. Though Denmark, Sweden, Italy, France, Ireland or Belgium also step onto the scene here and there, the German and British elements dominate the book. For sure, this is not scandalous at all. Apart from the language question that eased the U.S. quest in the United Kingdom, Germany and Great Britain are arguably at the forefront of the shocks created by the age of capitalism, and offered natural breeding grounds for the invention of social politics that American progressives were in search of. Above all, as the major purpose of the book is to recover the process of importation, it is fair to give priority to the countries that were privileged by the U.S. importers themselves. If these were Germany and the United Kingdom, why should we bother? But if we, as the book deserves, consider Rodgers' work as something more than a piece of U.S. history, and see it as an attempt and a call to study connections, to bring more light on how ideas circulated and were changed in this circulation process, then we may want to explore the question further.