
Evaluating the Effectiveness of the New Deal: Twentieth Century Historians and their Unsuccessful Attempts to Escape from Present Circumstances and Historiographical Trends

Josh Bill

Josh Bill is a first-year graduate student enrolled in Eastern Illinois University's online MA in History program for teachers. He wrote this paper as part of Dr. Curry's HIS 5000: Historiography course. Mr. Bill is a United States history teacher at Waukegan High School, and in 2012 he was awarded the Gilder Lehrman Institute's National History Teacher of the Year award.

Preface

Students of history in the twenty-first century find themselves surrounded by a multitude of approaches to the discipline with no shortage of models to follow. No longer must historians strictly adhere to rigid narratives detailing only “the facts” as Leopold Von Ranke advocated. A budding historian must consider where his/her approach will lie between the extremes of Von Ranke and, say, Howard Zinn, who preferred to engage in a study of the past that informed present circumstances. As times have changed, so too have approaches to the research and writing of history. Will an individual engage in a Marxist or postmodern analytical approach? Should social history be included or ignored? What duration of time and place will be studied? With so many questions, it is no wonder that historians are metacognitive about what they do. Perhaps in their debates they seek to convince themselves of the proper approach as much as to convince the reader. The reflections and writings of historians who study the New Deal often confirm that the present impacted their study of the past. Whether the country was emerging from McCarthyism, trying to repair the shattered idealism of failed policies relating to the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam, worrying about the uncertain economic times of the 1980s, or watching impeachment proceedings against an embattled president at the end of the century, twentieth-century historians find themselves in the midst of these debates, knowingly or unknowingly; they pointed fingers at the past and searched for common themes in bygone times. Often, though not always, their work reflected the prevailing historiographical trends of that era; historians who engaged in a study of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal have never managed to remove themselves from their present circumstances as they engaged in a study of the past.

A Developing Story: First Writings of the New Deal

It is surprising how impatient some are to write history; often, the people who choose to write while events are still unfolding are not historians. These writers do contribute to the process of historical discourse and are thus important to briefly consider, as their works are often first-hand, primary source accounts. Before President Roosevelt's second term was over, there were already several books that had been published about the New Deal. Those who crafted these works were often deeply connected to the president himself or the circumstances from which they wrote. In 1939, Raymond Moley, once chief strategist of Roosevelt's “brain trust,” wrote an account of the New Deal entitled *After Seven Years*. Moley's foreword, filled with disclaimers about how the book

was not going to be a history of the previous seven years, nor a biography of Roosevelt, alluded to his desire to foster debate on contemporary issues he thought were facing the United States.¹ His work accomplished that and much more, for historians still refer to Moley's writing. Moley left Roosevelt's side and eventually left the Democratic Party as a result of New Deal policies that he felt endangered business interests.² In some senses, Moley, even though deeply connected to the president and certainly unable to see him objectively, began what was to continue in decades of historiography to follow: an ongoing conversation about the successes and failures of the New Deal with the partisan ideologies of the people who wrote it often steering the conclusion. Non-historians like Moley who attempt to enter the historical arena, often help to frame debates that professional historians will engage in during the following decades. Whereas Moley felt that the New Deal was too progressive for his politics, members of the so-called New Left, for instance, would take issue with the notion that the New Deal was a failure for not taking progressive reform far enough.

When Curtis Nettles, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, looked at the developing New Deal in 1934, his insights reflected a recent historiographical trend. Initially, Nettles lamented that historians were powerless to shape future events. He cited Woodrow Wilson's past experience as an historian, as well as the historical advisors Wilson took to Versailles, as a failed venture in a scholar's ability to predict and shape the future. The sole purpose of Nettles' piece was to inspire hope that the Roosevelt administration would be more successful drawing on the expertise of a more recent historiographical trend than what Wilson had relied on. The more recent trend was Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. Nettles argued that seven architects of the New Deal were Westerners and that Roosevelt's cabinet was no longer simply relying on the old New England ideology that Turner rejected, but that they were also gearing their stimulus towards the West, which was in dire need of it.³ Nettles faced the future with optimism and hopeful predictions, suggesting that Roosevelt was planning a revived emphasis on the frontier. There was some truth to this. The New Deal did focus its attention on the West through the Agricultural Adjustment Act and other measures, but there is little evidence to suggest that this happened as a result of the influence of Turner.⁴ Nettles and others who wrote in the midst of fluid circumstances often seemed either overly optimistic or pessimistic. These early writings are the first in what would be a long series of evaluations by specially-trained historians who would pore over numerous primary source documents as well as these discursive pieces. Regrettably, most of the accounts written in the midst of the New Deal were too filled with incomplete prophesy, personal vendetta, or some other blinder of presentism to be valuable as comprehensive historiographical pieces. Those needed to be written by the next generation of historians.

Schlesinger Jr. and Hofstadter set Historiographical Trends in New Deal Scholarship

Two historians would rise above the rest to define the New Deal in the 1950s. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Age of Roosevelt* and Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* not only came to define New Deal historiographical debates in the decade following their publication, but both are still widely consulted by historians today. Alan Brinkley, who wrote *Liberalism and Its Discontents* at the end of the twentieth century, argued that Schlesinger's work inspired scholars with its "literary

¹ Raymond Moley, *After Seven Years* (New York,; Harper & Bros., 1939), xi.

² *Ibid.*, 310-312.

³ Curtis Nettles, "Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Deal," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 17, no. 3 (1934): 257-65.

⁴ In Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959) there is one mention of the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner and the disappearance of the frontier. It was referenced in the context of fears that it was coming true: that the frontier was disappearing. Nothing was mentioned about frontier ideology being used by the "brain trust."

grace” and “interpretive stance,”⁵ while Hofstadter was significant for his early use of social history methodology, as well as his refusal to place the New Deal within the progressive era of reform in the United States. To him, it was an emergency response separate from earlier progressivism. Schlesinger and Hofstadter, both liberals writing during an era of American history influenced by Cold War tensions and McCarthyism, were careful about how they characterized the policies of the New Deal, which some in the United States felt were socialist in nature. Each historian, however, took a different approach that led to continuous debate by later scholars.

The near-universally lauded trifecta of *The Crisis of the Old Order*, *The Coming of the New Deal*, and *The Politics of Upheaval*, written by Schlesinger at the end of the 1950s, comes closer to a pure study of the New Deal than any other source. More than one thousand pages depict the New Deal in a scholarly framework. Yet Schlesinger’s narrative style is accessible to any reader. His work blends the best practices of Herodotus, including entertaining stories that can captivate the reader, and Von Ranke’s scrupulous adherence to citations and evidence (*The Coming of the New Deal* includes fifty pages of endnotes) to create a most informative and entertaining account of the Great Depression and New Deal. Anecdotes of conversations Roosevelt had with his cabinet during the banking crisis⁶ were written in a way that made them nearly as exciting as a group of radical farmers in Le Mars, Iowa, who dragged a judge through the streets until he agreed to stop foreclosures in the county.⁷ Schlesinger was certainly one who believed that the writing of history could be both art and science.

Schlesinger was old enough to remember the Great Depression, but differed from most who had written about the New Deal prior to his work; as a teenager, he was neither old enough to have voted for Roosevelt nor making adult household decisions based on poverty or New Deal policies. This distance allowed him to engage in a more authentic analysis of the 1930s without having a deeply personal adult connection to the era. Although there are scholars who take issue with Schlesinger’s later work, *The Age of Roosevelt* is frequently consulted as a valued reference by modern historians. Even James Nuechterlein, in a 1977 piece that took great issue with Schlesinger’s political views and his influence on liberal scholarship, took great pains in a footnote to compliment Schlesinger’s writings in *The Age of Roosevelt* series, calling it “one of the genuine moments of twentieth century American historiography.”⁸

Schlesinger’s thesis centered on the idea that there was a cyclical pattern within political history where conservative forces grow during periods of liberal shortcomings and liberal forces gain momentum in times of conservative political stumbling. In the early pages of *The Coming of the New Deal*, Schlesinger recounts the “impotence” of the conservative leadership of the Hoover administration in dealing with the problems of America’s broken economic system and the sweeping changes the American people supported in a wave of liberalism during the first one hundred days of the New Deal.⁹ This is starkly contrasted in *The Politics of Upheaval*, which, from the onset, shows how some Americans were losing faith in Roosevelt’s New Deal in the face of its legal setbacks and economic stagnation in the mid-1930s.¹⁰ Schlesinger’s balanced treatment of the transition from conservative to liberal policies and ever-shifting responses of the American people to New Deal policy stands as an example of a historian rising above partisan circumstances to deliver writing unencumbered by the political climate that surrounded him.

⁵ Alan Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 111-112.

⁶ Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁸ James A. Nuechterlein, “Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and the Discontents of Postwar American Liberalism,” *The Review of Politics* 39, no. 1 (1977): 16.

⁹ Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 1-23.

¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 1-14.

While many celebrated Schlesinger's scholarship on the New Deal, there is definitely room for criticism, as it neglected the role of women in shaping and promoting the policies that fostered the reconstruction of the nation's economy. Frances Perkins and Eleanor Roosevelt are given scant attention by Schlesinger. Even less attention is paid to the role of African Americans in forming or being impacted by New Deal legislation. These flaws, while not excusable, are to be expected given that the books' publication in the 1950s is prior to large-scale gender or postmodern historiography. Developments in these fields, however, would greatly shape upcoming histories of the New Deal.

There were early traces of the study of social history in Richard Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* Hofstadter utilized the writings and work of literary, economic and sociological scholars to weave together the mindset of individuals who comprised the Populist and Progressive movements in the United States. He invoked literary critic Lionel Trilling to theorize about how liberal politicians could be popular with conservatives,¹¹ and he often referenced the work of John Maynard Keynes and other economists to describe how their approaches to the New Deal contrasted with Roosevelt's.¹² Social history was in its infancy, but Alan Brinkley, when writing about the historiography of this period, insists that Hofstadter's early advocacy of other social sciences outside of the traditional realm of history makes Hofstadter's work invaluable.¹³

Although Hofstadter's analysis of the New Deal makes up only sixty pages of *The Age of Reform*, he raised many eyebrows by characterizing Roosevelt's policies as the "chaos of experimentation" and something distinct and separate from the Progressive Era, rather than a continuation of it. The old progressive ideologies were bypassed.¹⁴ Breaking away from Schlesinger's argument that liberal and conservative politics were cyclical, opposing one another until eventually one force replaced the other as a governing power in America, Hofstadter found an alternative explanation to the politics of the New Deal. He insisted that the New Deal's clumsy, unphilosophical, and incomplete approach to fixing an economic catastrophe marked the end of real progressive politics in the United States. Future historians would either build on one of these camps or tear them both down. Schlesinger and Hofstadter, both writing in the midst of the Cold War, both being careful not to overpraise liberalism or villainize conservatism, and neither having direct connections to Roosevelt or his policies, set the tone for the New Deal history that would fill volumes for the next fifty years.

The New Left and the Turmoil of the 1960s

The sixties brought unprecedented changes for the United States. African Americans engaged in massive protests, militant action, and legal challenges in an attempt to end the discrimination that had plagued them since the earliest days of our republic. Cold War tensions erupted into the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War. Assassinations of political and civilian leaders provoked questions about the direction of progress. The true constant factor in the 1960s was change, and few knew what would happen next. Historical study, which previously seemed an anchor of consistency during the turmoil of global conflict in the twentieth century, was about to experience a radical shake-up.

Out of the confusion of the 1960s came a flurry of writings by highly-educated social commentators; some had specialized education in history, but many were trained in other social sciences. Young people in America fervently protested the injustices within the country; at times, they joined organizations like Students for a Democratic Society and the Student Non-Violent

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 307-316.

¹³ Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, 132.

¹⁴ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 307.

Coordinating Committee. They were disappointed with liberal leaders of the decade and their inability to solve growing problems in the United States. Some of these young protesters, often referred to as the “New Left,” looked to history for guidance; they found most scholarship severely deficient. Scholars who began engaging in social history methodology and including minority voices in their studies suspected that the failures in 1960s America had roots in the policies and practices of the New Deal. Richard J. Evans summarized the historiographical trends of this period well:

Social history broke out of its ideological and institutional straightjacket. History “from the bottom up” became the key practice of left-wing historians, as they turned to rediscover examples of radical protest and rebellion in American history that had been forgotten because they had had no formal organizations or written programs. Marxism was an influence on many of these historians... but it was a Marxism shorn of dogma and cut loose from its former moorings in the Communist tradition.¹⁵

Evans’ characterization of 1960s historiography shows the influence of the social sciences, the influence of unfolding events in American life, and even the influence of Marxist theory (though not rigidly defined within the methodology of dialectical materialism, but more so as a realization of the role of class in history) shaped historiography of the 1960s.

Prior to the turbulence of the late 1960s, which fueled rabid New Left criticism of New Deal historiography, William Leuchtenburg’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* was released to the public in 1963. While Leuchtenburg’s work neither directly subscribed to the Marxist or New Left analytical framework, he was critical of the New Deal as an incomplete revolution that ultimately fell short of helping those most in need of support from the government.¹⁶ It seems fitting that Leuchtenburg began to chip away at the positive legacy of the New Deal as a result of its shortcomings in providing for those most in need in American society. Over the next five years following his publication, the inadequacies of liberal reform would be explored in numerous ways, and with that would come ever-increasing criticism on the incomplete New Deal.

Barton J. Bernstein, one of several historians often associated with New Left scholarship of the 1960s,¹⁷ lambasted the New Deal’s inability to put an end to the Great Depression. Furthermore, Bernstein contended that the New Deal, “failed to redistribute income, it failed to extend equality and generally countenanced racial discrimination and segregation.”¹⁸ He went on to say that the New Deal left workers in industrial factories helpless, lifting up only union members and their leadership.¹⁹ Bernstein’s latter point clearly illustrates the impact of Marx’s dialectical materialism on Bernstein’s classification of the New Deal as a failure not producing lasting change for the proletariat of America. Unquestionably, the civil rights struggle as well as civil unrest between African Americans and white people within the United States during the 1960s had an impact on Bernstein’s historical interpretation.

¹⁵ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 145.

¹⁶ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

¹⁷ Bernstein is labeled as part of the New Left in B. H. Nelson’s “Review of Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History,” *The Journal of Negro History* 54, no. 2 (January 1969): 69 and is frequently cited as a New Left historian in Jerold S. Auerbach’s “New Deal, Old Deal, or Raw Deal: Some Thoughts on New Left Historiography,” *The Journal of Southern History* 35, no. 1 (February 1969).

¹⁸ Barton J. Bernstein, “The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform,” in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Random House, 1968), 264.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 280-281.

New Left historians like Bernstein were clearly influenced by other works of the period. Howard Zinn's *New Deal Thought*, and several other writings,²⁰ were often held up as inspirations to the New Left. Zinn, familiar with Karl Marx's analytical framework of class struggle, wrote with some admiration of Roosevelt himself, but the president's economic program failed to address the lowest classes in society. The New Deal, Zinn concluded, was an experiment that fell short of creating a society where the working class shared in prosperity and New Deal legislation ignored the plight of African Americans.²¹ Zinn pushed for what he called "New Deal Thought." He advocated reinvigorating the spirit of experimentation, conservatively exercised by Roosevelt, which involved trying to use the government to improve the economy, and applying it to the problems gripping America in the 1960s. Historically, Zinn saw Roosevelt's New Deal as inadequate. Observing the racial tension that led to violence in northern ghettos in his own time, Zinn traced the strife back to the Great Depression.²²

When British historian John Tosh reviewed the concept of "history from below" in his compilation, *Historians on History*, he spoke of a rejection of "history from above" and how young thinkers in America were losing patience "with the more abstract tendencies in Marxist scholarship."²³ Part of the reason why Howard Zinn inspired so many young historians on the left was his dedication to drawing from the social sciences and highlighting "history from below." In *New Deal Thought*, Zinn included excerpts from novelist John Steinbeck²⁴ to underscore the plight of farmers, and a member of FDR's "black cabinet," Robert C. Weaver, to illustrate the difficulties of African Americans during the Great Depression.²⁵ By including these works, he made use of the social history movement, drew on Marx's dialectical materialism framework, and influenced (indirectly) those on the New Left and any others who would listen about how real reform could be accomplished by invoking "New Deal Thought."

New Left historians, like Bernstein, provide a glimpse of the real feeling reverberating in different parts of the nation in the 1960s; they also compelled historians to rethink their interpretations, ultimately giving new life to their studies. While few on the New Left produced lasting works that would prove invaluable to scholarship of the New Deal, historians who make a splash, even if they fail to withstand the test of time, live on in the minds of others. Many contemporary historians are still attempting to respond to criticisms of the New Deal those on the New Left levied more than fifty years ago. Whether it was questions raised by the New Left, or just by the social situation of the 1960s in general, the historiography of the New Deal became more inclusive of voices "from below," such as women, African Americans, and other downtrodden members of society. They would begin to factor prominently in New Deal historiography in the next several decades.

James Patterson, Social History in the States, and Other Trends of the 1970s

In the midst of the social and historiographical upheaval of the late 1960s, James T. Patterson produced an essay for the *American Historical Review* challenging historians to investigate a different set of debates. This piece, "The New Deal and the States," eventually became a book with the same title. Patterson proclaimed (incorrectly, in my opinion) that there was a general consensus

²⁰ One of many accounts of Zinn's influence on the New Left mindset can be found in Staughton Lynd's "The New Left," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382, (March 1969).

²¹ Howard Zinn, *New Deal Thought*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

²² *Ibid.*, xvi.

²³ John Tosh, ed., *Historians on History: Readings*, 2nd ed (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009).

²⁴ Zinn, *New Deal Thought*, 243-251.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 324-331.

among historians of the New Deal regarding its objectives and the extent to which those were met.²⁶ Perhaps Patterson, like many historians, was dismissive of the New Left's interpretation of the New Deal. He surmised that the ever-evolving point of disagreement was how the New Deal impacted the states. The answers to this historical query varied depending on the individual state: thus, Patterson argued that the New Deal ushered in a new age of federalism, but ultimately had a limited impact on the states. The New Deal, he concluded, "far from being a dictatorial blueprint, was more like an overused piece of carbon paper whose imprint on the states was often faint and indistinct."²⁷ While this was Patterson's hypothesis, he called upon historians to take on a deeper and more thorough investigation within the history of various states to see if his thesis had merit. Patterson fostered a huge wave of scholarship relating to the New Deal's impact on state governments that continues to motivate national, state, and local historians to search for their locality's response to the New Deal. Historians reading Patterson's work had seen social science methodologies increasingly used to underscore the problems inherent within the New Deal. Now, they would utilize those methodologies in order to investigate the effectiveness of the New Deal through the lens of a state. Many historians who took to working on the New Deal and state governments found ways to incorporate minority voices that were just starting to be brought to the forefront of historiography in the era of the New Left.

In the mid-1970s, John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody published a two-volume collection of essays; they were turning away from conservative critics of the New Deal, as well as liberal champions and more radical detractors, to establish a complex collection of thought taking New Deal historiography into what they felt was a more productive direction for the last quarter of the twentieth century.²⁸ To underscore Patterson's influence, the entire second volume of Braeman, Bremner, and Brody's anthology dealt with historians who had investigated the New Deal in particular states. Thirteen essays representing different states and regions appeared within the historians' collection.

While there might have been a new point of focus after Patterson, historians continued to reveal a very mixed New Deal legacy. The methodological approach of social historians, however, continued to evolve in productive ways. Michael Malone found himself in uncharted waters as he researched the history of Montana in the 1930s. He noted that almost no twentieth-century scholarship existed relating to that state. Relying heavily on newspapers and the personal papers of Montana politicians, Malone articulated real (albeit short-lived) liberal progress in a state very few individuals know much about, with those who do often associating it with dominant conservative political forces.²⁹ Drawing attention to a completely different region and group of people, Bruce Stave looked at the New Deal's life in Pittsburgh. Stave, though not associated with the New Left, reached a similar conclusion, which was that the New Deal was unable to do much for Pittsburgh's African American citizens. Stave, like Malone, relied on newspaper accounts, but he also included tables and charts from Pennsylvania's legislative manuals and atlases to show that a New Deal political coalition was established in Pittsburgh.³⁰ Patterson, along with Braeman, Bremner, and Brody, were hopeful that focusing scholarship on the states might yield renewed conclusions about the national New Deal. While that did not happen, models for how to engage in high-level social history were being expanded as a result of small-scale studies of the states.

²⁶ James T. Patterson, "The New Deal and the States," *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 1 (1967): 70.

²⁷ James T. Patterson, *The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 126.

²⁸ John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody eds., *The New Deal*, Modern America, vol. 1 (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1975).

²⁹ Michael P. Malone, "The Montana New Dealers," in *The New Deal*, vol. 2, ed., John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, 240-268.

³⁰ Bruce M. Stave, "Pittsburgh and the New Deal," in *The New Deal*, vol. 2, ed., Braeman, Bremner, and Brody, 376-406.

If nothing else, the 1970s were calmer than the previous decade in the United States. Racial and gender discrimination were still taking place, but the sixties had given Americans the chance to examine themselves. It is heartening to see histories of African Americans and women starting to reach the pages of large-scale research of the New Deal. What is disheartening was that in the 1970s and early 1980s, there was still a feel of patronizing tokenism within these histories. Susan Ware elaborated on this notion. In her essay, "Women and the New Deal," Ware stated that "the impact of the New Deal on women in general, beyond those exceptional women who served in the New Deal administration, remains mixed."³¹ Ware, bolstered by a recent feminist movement, vehemently insisted that historians need to study women who were not just in Roosevelt's cabinet, but also women who organized and battled in various ways throughout the United States.³² Her calls would be heeded by other historians and helped by a postmodernist wave of scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s.

New Hard Times: The 1980s Inspires a Look at New Avenues of Study

Just as cultural disturbances inspired the New Left to look for answers from history, and trends in social history opened new doors for historical inquiry, the economic challenges of the 1970s and 1980s created opportunities for historians to investigate matters that might inform a country suffering through its worst economic downturn since New Deal policies were in effect. Albert Romasco's *The Politics of Recovery: Roosevelt's New Deal* analyzed the temperament of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his ability to sell aspects of the New Deal to the American people. Romasco relied heavily on primary source materials; the secondary sources he used were some of the more classical studies on the New Deal (Schlesinger is a mainstay in Romasco's notes). His work reads quite a bit like Schlesinger's. Perhaps Romasco wanted a return to basic historical study. Likely influenced by a stagnating economy as he conducted his research in 1981 and 1982, Romasco realized that his world had still been shaped by Roosevelt's New Deal. On the final page of his work, he asks, "How then does political leadership reconcile the tension in values that exists between maintaining national unity and preserving traditional personal liberties?" The answer, Romasco concludes, centers on the proper balance from an able leader, and he concluded that no one but Franklin Roosevelt could have accomplished more in the face of the Great Depression.³³ It is unclear whether Romasco was frustrated with then-President Ronald Reagan or not, but without a doubt the parallels between the 1930s and 1980s must have been on the mind of Romasco and his readers.

Taking a different approach, Mark Leff studied the tax policies of the New Deal in *The Limits of Symbolic Reform: The New Deal and Taxation, 1933-1939*. Leff admitted that the idea for his book began in a graduate seminar fifteen years before he published it,³⁴ but undoubtedly Reagan's tax policies were not far from Leff's mind as he finished the book in 1984. Characterizing taxation as a "lighting rod of the New Deal," Leff argued that Roosevelt's taxes were not progressive, but were merely symbolic; the president, Leff concluded, had squandered his chance at real progressive reform.³⁵ Leff, like historians of the sixties and seventies, continued to utilize the social sciences to create new historiography of the New Deal. Very few books focused on tax reform during the New Deal the way that Leff did. He extensively relied on business reports, newspaper accounts, diary

³¹ Susan Ware, "Women and the New Deal," in Harvard Sitkoff and University of New Hampshire History Department, eds., *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated*, 1st ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 129.

³² *Ibid.*, 131.

³³ Albert U. Romasco, *The Politics of Recovery: Roosevelt's New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 247.

³⁴ Mark Hugh Leff, *The Limits of Symbolic Reform: The New Deal and Taxation, 1933-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

entries within the “brain trust,” and political cartoons to address both the reality and symbolism behind FDR’s incomplete reform. Leff’s descriptions of how Roosevelt was able to fool the public and partner with businesses highlights the difficulties ordinary people have in understanding tax policy,³⁶ an idea that remains timely.

Postmodernist epistemological thought began to establish itself among historians in the 1980s. Leff has elements of postmodernist thinking within his analysis. His argument was that Franklin Roosevelt was far more effective at symbolically changing the status of the downtrodden than he was at actually changing their circumstances. Leff incorporated FDR’s symbols like “the forgotten man,” as well as numerous political cartoons within the pages of his book³⁷ to show how people were being manipulated into thinking that Roosevelt’s progressive tax reform was sticking it to big business and standing up for the poor.³⁸ The reality, Leff argued, was quite different. Nevertheless, the “cultural turn” was impacting historians; they were moving away from time-consuming and expensive compilations of databases (the building blocks of social history) to engaging in a new study of the ways in which people make sense of the power structures in their world.

Studying the New Deal from the United Kingdom, Stuart Kidd wrote an account suggesting postmodernist thought should be applied to historical studies of the New Deal. Kidd began his piece by reviewing historiographical trends that he felt had been exhausted. Kidd insisted, however, that a vast reservoir of cultural resources had yet to be tapped into by historians. Kidd harnessed full-page images of Diego Rivera murals and Dorothea Lange photographs to study how these images represented symbols of how Americans saw themselves as empowered by the government and how art emphasized “community building, westward expansion, and the heroic qualities of both early settlers and modern farmers; the images] represented American history as a chronicle of purposeful and productive progress.”³⁹ Photographers employed by the government to produce documentary images captured the dignity of labor, often showing Americans at work. The symbols found within government-sponsored photographs or popular culture supportive of the president’s policies helped to make people believe that the New Deal had empowered them. The photographers often captured people engaged in noble work “[becoming] a universal symbol for the dignity of labour.”⁴⁰ Kidd’s use of these resources supported his conclusion that despite the political imperfections of the New Deal, the American people were largely supportive of the programs.⁴¹ To Kidd, historians could revise fruitfully their understanding of the New Deal by considering methodologies popularized as part of the “cultural turn.”

The End of a Century: Synthesizing Different Approaches to Historiography

Students entering graduate and doctoral programs in history during the 1990s had a plethora of choices regarding methodology and analytical framework. Many were thrilled to merge postmodern approaches advocated by Michel Foucault, who argued that power in society was decentralized into various inequalities within society, with gender studies championed by Joan Scott, who wanted more than just “women’s history.” Scott longed for a new history that was informed by paying attention to women, a long-ignored segment of the populace, creating new interpretations

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Ibid., 86, 154, and 161 show a few of many political cartoons utilized by Leff.

³⁸ Leff’s first chapter, “Taxing the Forgotten Man” assessed the rhetoric of Roosevelt and the opportunities for progressive tax reform.

³⁹ Stuart Kidd, “Redefining the New Deal: Some Thoughts on the Political and Cultural Perspectives of Revisionism,” *Journal of American Studies* 22, no. 3 (1988): 408.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 409.

⁴¹ Ibid., 415.

that would allow people to “understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction.”⁴² Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, writing as a doctoral candidate at the University of North Carolina, found herself in the midst of this exciting synthesis of historiographical trends. Her article, “From Clubs to Parties: North Carolina Women in the Advancement of the New Deal,” encompassed many of the different styles of researching and writing history that had been utilized by historians throughout the twentieth century.

Wilkerson-Freeman clearly was following the lead of the social history tradition of New Deal history within the states, which James Patterson spearheaded in the mid-1970s, but instead of the tokenism in any accounts of women that appeared in these early state histories, Wilkerson-Freeman fully embraced Scott’s admonition that studying women would cast light on elements of political power that had been overlooked in traditional historical studies. “From Clubs to Parties” revealed that women in North Carolina cared considerably more about issues that would impact their lives than they did about party politics.⁴³ Furthermore, Wilkerson-Freeman centered her research on how Annie Land O’Berry and the collective efforts of other women in North Carolina overcame sexist attacks and skepticism to bring issues integral to women and families to the attention of state and national political leaders. It was clear that Wilkerson-Freeman relied heavily on social history methodology, as her footnotes demonstrate that she had to splice together a narrative from a wide variety of sources ranging from government documents and private papers. In doing this, Wilkerson-Freeman’s work made great strides towards addressing the deficits of the histories previously written. She also noted that there was quite a bit of work remaining. In one of her footnotes, she addressed the fact that scholarship on African American women in North Carolina did not exist in any specific way.⁴⁴

When Alan Brinkley set out to write *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*, he acknowledged that the term “liberal” had become somewhat of an enigma, symbolizing an honorable political tradition on one hand and a controversial representation of the welfare state on the other.⁴⁵ Like many people working in the spirit of postmodernism, Brinkley was attempting to redefine an identity: that of what it meant to be a liberal. Writing in the midst of a major clash between conservative and liberal forces during the Clinton administration, Brinkley set out to analyze the power structures within the New Deal to see if he might clarify for readers the history of twentieth-century liberalism. He admitted at the end of his introduction that he was inspired to write the book during the “Reagan Revolution.” Brinkley explained that his book “tells the story of one effort to transform liberalism in response to the demands of a new and challenging time. Another such effort is still in progress.”⁴⁶ The remainder of the book investigates different clashes between liberal and conservative forces during the New Deal. The influence of postmodernism can be seen in Brinkley’s work as he tries to reposition liberal identity.

Interestingly, while historians like Wilkerson-Freeman were trying to establish a historiography of people whose identity had been ignored, Brinkley in *End of Reform* and his later compilation, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* aimed to reexamine the identity of a frequently-studied population. The series of essays Brinkley wrote in his attempt to rebrand liberalism was steeped in New Deal historiography. Brinkley tracked how historians treated the New Deal directly in the first four chapters of *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, but he also frequently brought up New Deal

⁴² Joan Scott, from “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in Tosh, *Historians on History*, 145-148.

⁴³ Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, “From Clubs to Parties: North Carolina Women in the Advancement of the New Deal,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (1991): 321.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁴⁵ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 10-11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

scholarship in later chapters about subsequent liberal movements, such as his discussion of the New Left. Their critique of New Deal liberal reform as woefully inadequate sparked debate about liberal policy from people on both sides of the political spectrum. In other words, it was not just political developments of the New Deal that had framed the way people reacted to liberalism, but the ways historians wrote about liberal government reform would also impact the public's understanding of the term liberal.⁴⁷

FDR and the New Deal in Stone, Marble, and Bronze: The Public History Conundrum

The final chapter of Brinkley's *Liberalism and Its Discontents* inspected the complexities within the field of public history. Although he does not speak directly about the New Deal in this section, how history is displayed to the public occupies the mind of both the historian and the layman. A frustrated Otis Graham, Jr. spoke in *The Public Historian* of his anger at the controversies that arose in memorializing Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal on the national mall in Washington, D.C. Many of these controversies had nothing to do with the New Deal (some people objected to the original design of Eleanor Roosevelt's statue with her wearing her trademark fox-fur boa, while advocates for disabled Americans resisted the fact that initially, no statue would show FDR in his wheelchair). Graham felt that these discussions over-sanitized history and gave into pressures to be politically correct instead of historically accurate. He noted that he enjoyed the monument's depiction of the American people reacting to the New Deal, like the sculpture of a person listening to the radio, hoping for better days. When Graham visited the monument, however, he felt as if the people visiting were missing that the point was to depict hardship and hopelessness that was partially rectified by Roosevelt's policies. "Visitors touch the bas-reliefs, photograph their children in front of Eleanor, and play in the waterfalls, laughing and wearing their \$70 Nike tennis shoes. Historian William Leuchtenburg... told a reporter he is not sure he wants to revisit the site with the people in it... What is being felt or understood here?"⁴⁸ Graham might have to live with his annoyance, but controversies that surround the memorialization of the New Deal must be sensitively handled. For far too long, historians left out voices of ordinary people; in the spirit of fairness, these people should have some means of voicing their displeasure at the telling of history.

In historian Allida Black's critique of the FDR Memorial, we find that the postmodernist question of how power, gender, and identity influence experience is squarely part of the debate over the public history of the New Deal. Black takes issue with the placement of Eleanor Roosevelt's statue, for it seems as if she was relegated to the shadows of her husband, the same place historians put her and other women of the New Deal for decades. Despite the gains of the feminist movement and the leadership of gender historians, Eleanor Roosevelt is still just "Franklin's wife." Black eloquently described the issues she had with the monument:

The memorial not only ignores [Eleanor Roosevelt's] central role in the Roosevelt presidency, it runs away from it. Whereas the statues of FDR and Fala are grand, larger-than-life, easily accessible sculptures, the ER statue is barely her full height. Safely ensconced on the highest pedestal of the memorial in a small niche in the last room of the memorial, the statue depicts a resigned, world-weary woman, hands demurely clasped in front, leaving the United Nations.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Brinkley, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*.

⁴⁸ Otis L. Graham, "Editor's Corner: On the Mall, a Monument to the Nineties," *The Public Historian* 19, no. 3 (1997): 7-10.

⁴⁹ Allida Black, "Struggling with Icons: Memorializing Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 1 (1999):

Unfortunately, Black had identified just how slow we are to embrace progress. She concluded her piece by explaining how Americans are still uncomfortable with the roles of women in power.⁵⁰ The postmodernist methodology, which I initially struggled to comprehend, came into sharper focus after being exposed to works like Black's. The FDR Memorial is full of symbols, many of which are well done; it is similar to histories like Schlesinger's *Age of Roosevelt*, which are also well done in some senses, but incomplete in their treatment of gender. It will take time to change the historiographical perception of women as subordinate to men, even when they were equal or greater partners, as was the case for Eleanor. Unfortunately, Eleanor is forever fixed in bronze on the national mall, underscoring yet again why accurate public history and historiographies in general matter more than can be emphasized in a paper.

Conclusions

As the United States moved towards a new millennium, historical research into the New Deal was no longer dominated by historians who had lived through the 1930s. Once that change took place, new questions about how the New Deal should be studied or categorized came into focus. Historians always had to contend with their present circumstances shaping the way they saw the past, but American and world events, as well as courageous historians who blazed new trails in historiography, allowed more complete accounts of the New Deal to be written. There is still quite a ways to go in order for American historians to be able to say proudly that they have investigated all voices and perspectives of this time of sweeping political change. No doubt, historians in the twenty-first century will use the methodologies and analytical frameworks that were established in the twentieth century, but new and exciting historiographical trends will inevitably rise up in the future. As historians continue to change with the times, they will also continue to articulate their influences, both directly, through forewords, introductions, and prefaces, as well as indirectly, leaving their method of inquiry behind in their narratives and footnotes. How the next century will write about the New Deal is unknown, but it will, in some ways, reflect the ways in which society evolves over the next one hundred years.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.