

## BOOK REVIEW

*The New Deal: A Global History*, by Kiran Klaus Patel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 2016; pp. 435. £24.95).

In view of the plight of the neoliberal phase of global capitalism—it has entered stormy waters and faces conceivable disintegration—it is timely to look back at the previous phase. Governed by a variety of forms of *étatisme*, or state capitalism, the key institutional innovations flourished between 1914 and 1945. These included import substitution industrialisation and the nationalisation of strategic industries during the First World War, corporatism and Five-Year Plans in the 1920s, and Keynesianism in the 1930s. Even the United States was caught up in the global shift. Its variant was the New Deal.

Kiran Klaus Patel's magisterial book presents the New Deal as innovative and unique but part of a broader global trend. His forte lies in meticulous analysis of a dazzling range of issues, from agricultural policy to consumer co-operatives, trade reform to politicians' use of new media, in each case investigating the US experience through an international comparative lens. The most illuminating passages concern less well-known developments, such as plans to bring technologically advanced urban modernity to depressed rural areas. The technocratic paternalism of the New Deal, with its expert-designed green-belt towns and model villages, is set against counterparts elsewhere: new settlements on reclaimed land in the Netherlands, German colonists constructing *Musterstädte* in occupied zones, Japanese *bunson* in Manchukuo and Zionist colonies in British-occupied Palestine.

Alongside the relations of state with economy, the global transformation also affected those of state with citizenry. States promised more, but in return they 'exerted new forms of control', penetrating aspects of life that had hitherto been considered private (p. 195). Patel's eye is trained on both these areas of change, expertly linking them to broader processes. A sub-section on Puerto Rico, for example, discusses New Deal programmes there which, although failures, were forerunners of later overseas development projects, before moving on to reveal Roosevelt's eugenicist fantasy of scything the island's population. ('It is all very simple and painless—you have people pass through a narrow passage and then there is a brrrrr of an electrical apparatus. They stay there for twenty seconds and from then on they are sterile' [p. 164].) On the question of racism, as much else, Patel draws on primary research in addition to a wealth of secondary literature. He reminds us that the Roosevelt administration did nothing to revise or reverse the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s, and that Jim Crow occupied a central seat at the New Deal table. The bulk of African Americans were excluded from the new social security provisions, giving segregation and discrimination 'a new federal legitimacy' (p. 241), and some keynote programmes, notably the Manhattan Project, 'established racially segregated communities' (p. 269). Among the left intelligentsia, however, the 1930s also saw a gear shift in the argument that US identity is polychromatic, not WASP.

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In terms of chronology, Patel follows the usual script. The early New Deal saw America lurch ‘in the direction of European-style social democracy’, with big government and comprehensive institutional regulation. It was a radical departure, but hardly more so than elsewhere. For example, although Roosevelt and his *confrères* ‘loved their dams and other big infrastructure projects’, on public housing they were ‘ambivalent’ (p. 203). As in Germany in the mid-1930s, the early New Deal focused on supporting private home-owners, given that foreclosures affecting the middle classes represented ‘a bigger threat to the existing economic system than the deplorable housing conditions of the have-nots’ (p. 208). In the later New Deal, the commitment to the existing business system was clearer still, with the economic role of the state envisaged primarily as stimulating consumption through public spending—and even that only seriously made an impact through war.

It was the war ‘that actually *made* the New Deal’ (p. 271). Arms-spending re-ignited economic growth, while the wider exigencies of war reinforced the state’s activist managerial agenda, with its emphases on security, regulation and welfare. Conversely, the New Deal helped make the war—in terms of specific investments (the TVA, for instance, contributed importantly to the construction of the atomic bomb) and the centrality of economic planning to the war effort. It was the war, too, that translated New Deal policies into global hegemony. In previous years, Washington had been ‘insulationist,’ in strategic orientation, and, although far from non-interventionist (notably vis-à-vis Latin America), then certainly less so than in previous or subsequent decades. During the war, social, economic and imperial goals merged. The new mantra held that the USA ‘bore global responsibility and should aim to globalize the New Deal’ (p. 275). At Bretton Woods, New Dealers set about establishing the US dollar as the world currency. Economic planning became central to US power projection, with Washington pouring vast sums into constructing administrative and economic capacities in Europe, Japan and beyond. In the process, social-democratic energies gradually dissipated, and many New Dealers converted to Cold War liberalism.

The breadth and depth of Patel’s research is formidable, and the result is impressively panoramic. Yet this is also a weakness. Because organised on strictly thematic lines, there is very little argument, and no room for debate with rival interpretations. The encyclopaedic ambition, moreover, underpins a conceptual looseness through which at times any development in the 1930s—the expansion of, say, electricity generation, highways and zoos, or the ‘stripped classicist’ architecture of the monumental buildings of Washington DC—is taken to be *in and of* the New Deal, with insufficient differentiation between New Deal *qua* articulated set of policy programmes and *qua* historical period.

A general strength of Patel’s tome lies in its exploration of the inner tensions and contradictions of the New Deal. In places, however, these are papered over. There is a tendency to gloss Roosevelt’s administrations as responding to ‘the threats that the Great Depression had exposed’ through, for example, innovative social reforms and the creation of ‘a more centralized and professionalized police force’ (p. 237). Elsewhere, however, Patel provides abundant evidence—of FBI intrusion, mass surveillance, internment of citizens of Japanese heritage and the spiking use of the death penalty (despite low-ish crime rates)—that make it plain that the newly professionalised security services were the *source* of threats to personal liberty and security, not guardian angels. A kindred

point applies to questions of democracy. Patel identifies a series of anti-democratic aspects of the Roosevelt era—the disproportionate influence of big business, the restrictive immigration measures that helped prepare the soil for McCarthyism, the cosyng up to despots to facilitate America's oil grab in the Middle East—yet he feels able to describe Roosevelt's USA as 'the arsenal of democracy' (p. 263).

The book lacks a conclusion. There is no attempt to summarise the author's overall take on his topic: what the New Deal tells us, what it was, what were its global dimensions. At one point (p. 228), Patel describes Marquis Childs' *Sweden: The Middle Way* as 'a book largely bereft of politics'. I fear the same might be said of his own.

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