

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Jefferson Cowie, The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics

Peter S. McInnis

Volume 83, Spring 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061051ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2019.0019>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McInnis, P. (2019). Review of [Jefferson Cowie, The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 83, 277–279.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2019.0019>

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

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

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

Hild has consulted salient historiography for *Arkansas's Gilded Age*. It complements a new essay collection on themes in southern labour history (Matthew Hild and Keri Leigh Merritt, eds. *Reconsidering Southern Labor History: Race, Class, and Power* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018]). Addressing conflicts about electoral politics, Hild notes that

reality was more complicated than doctrinal arguments. He also deals with voter suppression and violence against newly elected officials and Blacks. He explains that the term Great Upheaval entailed the railway uprising of 1877 as well as strikes of the mid-1880s and 1894. Hild substantiates his arguments with census records, papers of contemporary labour leaders, and meeting minutes. The text is supplemented with primary documents and a map.

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

ANTHONY NEWKIRK
Philander Smith College

Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016)

JEFFERSON COWIE has always published books with persistent influence. His earlier efforts, *Capital Moves* (New York: New Press, 2001) and *Stayin' Alive* (New York: New Press, 2011), offered incisive commentary on the systemic inequities of 20th-century capitalism and challenges to working-class solidarity. At first glance, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*

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

It is useful, once again, to be provided with detailed evidence that the New Deal was broadly successful in ameliorating economic inequality from the Great Depression well into the late-20th century. The positive role of the state was dramatically in evidence with the 1933 inauguration of the FDR Democrats as the ensuing flurry of “alphabet agencies”

which may not have transformed the nation as much as suspend disbelief in statist solutions. *The Great Exception* carefully reconstructs the confluence of political and social forces, from southern Dixiecrats to moderate Republicans, that advanced the New Deal. The persistent irritants of immigration and religious moralism were abated temporarily.

From this understanding, realizing this precisely balanced fulcrum would later totter appears inevitable. The longitudinal perspective does suggest the New Deal is framed by two gilded-age barriers. History makes clear reforms are not ratchet-like unidirectional but subject to destructive counterattack. Here, the narrative might have benefitted from the injection of more on the gathering formation of anti-progressive forces that would introduce not only the tremendously destructive Taft-Hartley Act by 1947, sidetrack Harry Truman’s Fair Deal postwar initiative, but also start to reformulate a broad coalition of their own to roll back economic and political reforms. Without question, the New Deal’s liberal consensus had intrinsic instability, but it took decades of conservative fracking to split apart the constituent elements. In our times, a list of regressive alphabet agencies, including: ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), AFP (Americans for Prosperity), the Olin Foundation, Mackinac Center, Cato Institute, all channel dark money from donors resolutely determined to eliminate all traces of the New Deal. Further, the book could add more of Franklin Roosevelt, the man, as it was the president’s dynamism and sheer force of personality that propelled the message of this ambitious agenda. While FDR had many detractors, few leaders could have marshalled the necessary political support for such an interventionist platform. This was another key element of the “extraordinary” moment. Neither the

charisma of John F. Kennedy, the back-room arm-twisting of Lyndon Johnson, nor the affable intellectualism of Barack Obama could yield similar results.

Despite the propensity of the progressive left to inflict self-wounds, Cowie rejects arguments that the Cold War, civil rights, anti-Vietnam activism, gender or sexual-identity equality undermined the New Deal coalition. Rather, it was the bedrock ideologies of strident individualism and anti-statist traditions that rallied to re-focus on anti-immigrant xenophobia, unconstrained racism, and resurgent religion that rent asunder Franklin Roosevelt's political project. Scholars of American history will hardly be surprised at these conclusions; however, *The Great Exception* sets out these issues with admirable clarity.

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

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

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

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

PETER S. MCINNIS

St Francis Xavier University