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Point/Counterpoint

Taking Exception: Christopher Phelps Challenges Jefferson Cowie's *The Great Exception*

Jefferson Cowie's new book *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (2016) follows his award-winning contributions *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (2000) and *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010).

The Great Exception's argument should be broadly familiar to labor historians, since a trial balloon co-authored with Nick Salvatore appeared as "The Long Exception" in *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (2008), generating debate with a number of prominent scholars.

The new book extends the argument, holding that the New Deal was brought about only by the contingency of a colossal Great Depression and the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, sealed by war. Weighing such variables as race, immigration, individualism, and the state, Cowie argues that convergences unlikely to repeat themselves laid the foundation for a more equitable form of political economy than existed before or since.

The following dialogue puts those propositions to the test.

The Great Exception argues that we should put the New Deal paradigm behind us as an aspiration for our political objectives. At the same time, the bulk of the book is a cogent exposition of the New Deal's success in establishing a high degree of economic citizenship—at least for the white, male working class—producing much greater income and wealth equality in the ensuing forty years than before or since. Why shouldn't we advocate a restoration of the Wagner Act to its full glory?

If ever there was bedrock evidence of my argument, it is the Wagner Act. The NLRA was part of the one big bang in the advancement of private-sector collective bargaining in the United States. For the entire postwar era and beyond, labor's efforts to reform labor law have largely come up empty despite untold millions in lobbying efforts. Attempts to repeal parts of Taft-Hartley, eliminate striker replacement, or do a complete overhaul in the form of the Employee Choice Act, failed under every Democratic administration between Truman and Obama.

So there are few things more futile in American politics than reforming labor law or more unique in American history than its creation. Because of this, the NLRA—along with Social Security and the Fair Labor Standards Act—need to be militantly defended in all of their glorious dysfunction

whenever and whenever possible. Witness, for instance, the overtime rules under the Obama administration, which make important gestures toward restoring key aspects of the FLSA.

While we need to preserve what is great about the old system, this book serves as an intellectual and political challenge to overthrow tired, golden age thinking so that we may begin anew.

But isn't the very concept of "the great exception" a case of golden age thinking? That is, to cast the New Deal order as a special, privileged island in American history is itself an idealization, isn't it?

It was a privileged island for working-class Americans, but let's not idealize it. It may have been an island, but waters were creeping up all around it. An era in which workers' interests were embedded in the state stands in contrast to the rough seas they faced since the dawn of the industrial era—and have been returned to today.

The question is not a simple binary of good or bad, idealized or pathologized, golden or tarnished. In the postwar era, inequality went down and prospects for regular people went up. But it was also very exclusive demographically and, while it had the illusion of permanence, very unstable as well. Let's embrace complexity here.

You treat the New Deal order as a true exception, a time when the laws of gravity of American political culture were momentarily suspended, with the two Gilded Ages bracketing it being more in line with core American values. In fact, you write of the United States as a "complex and conservative place" and speak of "the individualist ethos so deeply embedded in... America's public culture." You never define individualism, curiously, but isn't this just a new consensus history?

Whoa, there, I never come close to claiming anything as strict as the laws of gravity! Max Weber did say that culture—and in this case we're talking political culture—functioned like loaded dice. There is a probability that things will turn out in a particular way, but no guarantee. That's how I see the main currents in this book working.

Fair enough, so roll those dice.

Of the half-dozen themes that I discuss, individualism is certainly the most elusive—and fraught. I refer to individualism as ideology more than reality. But of course ideology can shape reality, and I think that's where we are in American political culture. As an ideology, individualism is so malleable, shifting, versatile, and protean as to almost defy simple categorization. Yet it resonates politically like few ideas do. Look around today, and we can see many ways that twisted versions of the Jeffersonian anti-statist tradition remain quite prevalent in American political discourse even in an age of tremendous corporate power and mass culture and mass consumption.

Consider that Hoover was invoking "rugged individualism" just before the crash and FDR preferred the term "liberalism" for the New Deal because it allowed him to advanced collective goals with a more acceptable individualist label. Individualism may be hard to pin down, but it's always there and, let us not forget, always mobilized by the most powerful of legal individuals, the corporation.

That said, as much as I was inspired by Richard Hofstadter's work, this is hardly consensus history. I place at the center of the story class conflict, racial conflict, and battles over competing ideas about what the country is or should be—exactly the types of conflict that the consensus historians overlooked. What I am writing about, however, are the most general patterns. Who won when and why? Workers won big exactly once. If you pull the lens back from the pointillism of the

new labor history, you see this is a large, diverse, fractious republic that came together nationally in a rare moment of relative homogeneity that delivered us to to our big social-democratic moment.

Is individualism really America's default tendency, if that's what's meant by loaded dice? From colonial mercantilism and Puritan communitarianism down through the coercive labor systems of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, through various republican, populist, and socialist radicalisms, on to Progressive do-gooder meddling moralism and the Great Society's Medicaid, Medicare, and Head Start, plenty of aspects of American policy and consciousness have run contrary to individualism. Even today Americans hold so tight to Social Security that although President George W. Bush had two Republican houses of Congress and sky-high ratings he couldn't privatize it. Many aspects of American history, whether admirable or awful, don't valorize the individual, right?

I wish the other aspects of my argument got half the attention as that people devote to what I say about individualism, but I guess we really need to get to the bottom of this one. American culture is a marbling of many things. It is not unrestrained, all-determining individualism that completely ends in 1929 and then starts up again in 1978. Yet there is a fascinating individualistic strain in American politics and if you weaken that element, as happened during the Depression and War, then you have a different culture—especially if an entire cluster of additional things changes at the same time.

The thirties and forties were far more collective and less individualistic than other times. Although I have differences with them, consider that Lizabeth Cohen calls it a “culture of unity” and Michael Denning calls it the “laboring of American culture” as distinct moments. Yet, as I argue, even the New Deal period reveals the continuation of a powerful strand of individualism ranging from those self-blaming letters unemployed people wrote to Roosevelt to the very framing of federal policy. To really grasp the book, you have to see it as being as much about continuities as ruptures.

Consider the very examples you list. Each has a collective dimension, of course. But the Puritans, it is said, started out to do good and ended up doing well. When the nation emancipated the slaves, they were given “nothing but freedom”—no collective economic resources on which to build a future. Republicanism can also be thought of as pre-liberalism and certainly based on individual property rights. The moralism of the Progressive movement was individualistic. Social Security was a conservative option selected because, as an entitlement to all, it would not be destroyed by future politicians. Nonetheless, at least according to Thomas Frank's new book, Clinton was thinking about privatising Social Security until Monica Lewinsky inadvertently saved the country.

In arguing that part of what created the New Deal was shutting off the immigration tap in the 1920s, are you giving inadvertent left cover to the build-the-wall types?

Let's not confuse history and politics. As much as we'd like simply to read our political morality tales into history, sometimes there is a painful tension between history and politics. The general suspension of the questions of immigration, more or less, between 1924 and 1965 transformed American politics and allowed the country to focus on economic questions. Few scholars have examined the significance of the *absence* of immigration in American life. I am a big fan of the New Deal, and I also think immigrants built and continue to build this country and deserve a number of routes to political and economic citizenship. This contradiction is one of the reasons that the New Deal makes for a problematic political metaphor for the future: in the global age, we appear to be locked down in a long term fight over the politics of immigration, and that creates obstacles to creating a politics of economic sharing and equality.

That could be disputed, but let's take another point. Breakthroughs, not just regressions, have marked the past half century, such that few African Americans, gays and lesbians, or women would opt to revert to 1955. These gains show our era is not a mere replay of the Victorian Gilded Age. One commonality of the thirties and sixties, from sit-downs to sit-ins, is struggle from below. FDR entered office a conservative looking to balance the budget; pitched industrial battles and radical insurgencies compelled his robust reforms of 1935. Isn't the lesson here not "chastened" recognition, as the book puts it, of the New Deal as chance one-off, but the enduring potentiality of boldness, disruption, and organizing?

Yes, massive breakthroughs of different kinds are all over the historical record—but really only one great leap forward in collective economic rights. All the victories on sexuality, gender, race, immigration, and ethnicity are enormously important. But they are different from the sole great leap forward *in collective economic rights and security*. While many of those civil rights era struggles tried to orient themselves on economic security, the end result overall was enhanced individual rights to compete in the labor market—not a change in the structure of the labor market itself. I certainly think the reformed individualism of the post-sixties era is one of the great democratic breakthroughs in U.S. history but is more contiguous with American ideas of freedom than the New Deal.

I think creative thinking and activism—whether bold, subtle, disruptive, or reformist—is exactly what is needed, fueled by good historical awareness and debate. All I am asking in this book is to reflect critically on this immense set of policy breakthroughs in the thirties and forties, and ask, “What circumstances allowed the progressive left to win?” The left is always there in its many forms, and, as you and Howard Brick point out in *Radicals in America*, dancing between margins and mainstream. The answer to its success on economic questions, I think, is that we had a pretty unique moment of unity in which there was the largest crisis in modern capitalism, we were not fighting over immigration, there was a ceasefire in the culture wars, Congress removed African Americans from welfare in order to win the powerful white South, and we had an extraordinarily rare moment in which a president and Congress approached things with the urgency of a wartime emergency. The result was this enormous policy edifice that lasted for decades and decades—much of it still with us.

A final salvo: The Great Exception ends by suggesting that instead of trying to resuscitate the New Deal we should revert to Progressive Era models, but by that you don't appear to mean syndicalism or socialism, rather reformism. Did that work even then to foster economic equality?

I'm glad you raised this, as this subargument generates a lot of concern. I meant not policy outcomes or ideology, but rather the types of alliances and politics of the period. The New Deal appears like a historical bloc: the incorporation of labor into the Democratic Party, a large set of intertwined federal policies, and most of the political action happening in Washington, D.C. The Progressive Era was much more fluid and shifting. The types of coalitions that emerged between labor, radicals, feminists of various kinds, religious groups, immigrant groups, often proved efficacious. James Kloppenberg said that the period had “all the neatness of a shattered kaleidoscope.” I think the future lies in those types of shifting and sliding alliances, with most of the action on the local and state levels.

That's what I mean when I suggest the Progressive Era, but perhaps we are hampered by historical analogies altogether!