The Mythical Man

David Montgomery
Yale University

Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have offered us two distinct arguments, one persuasive, the other anything but. There is much to be said for their proposition that the political coalitions that instituted New Deal reforms, far from being the historic culmination of an inexorable march from laissez-faire to the welfare state, were fragile and limited from the start and crumbled beyond the possibility of retrieval after 1970. Much more dubious is their contention that the basic explanation of both the limits and the defeat of the New Deal is to be found in a political culture of individualism, which they claim has circumscribed the political life of the United States from the nation's founding to the present.

The presentation of the limitations and ultimate downfall of the New Deal is thoughtful, though certainly not new to historians of the United States. Cowie's own pioneering studies of the relocations of business enterprises seeking to evade unionization and of the internal discussions and maneuvers of the Nixon administration in its effective efforts to woo the votes of white workers away from the Democrats by appealing to their patriotism, racism, rebellion against taxes, and desire for order in city streets and on college campuses have greatly enriched our understanding of the Republican triumph.[1] Nor is it hard to persuade historians that the political alignments of the period 1930–1950 differed significantly from those that had come before and from what would follow. Robert and Helen Lynd's contemporary study of Muncie had already illuminated the rallying of previously fragmented "business class" voters to the Republican fold in the 1930s. Samuel Lubell's deservedly influential *Future of American Politics* produced evidence that, although the voting patterns among working people of Old Immigrant stock had shifted noticeably, though *not* overwhelmingly, toward the Democrats during the Depression, it was a swelling tide of ballots cast by newly eligible immigrants and their children that secured Democratic strength in the White House, Congress, and many state legislatures. Richard Oestreicher has shown that class alignments shaped national voting patterns more definitively between 1936 and 1944 (and especially in 1940) than at any other time in the nation's history.[2]

The point can be made more generally. Eric Hobsbawm contends: "In most respects this conscious working-class cohesiveness reached its peak, in older developed countries, at the end of the Second World War."[3] Its legacy remained strong enough to sustain the mixed economies, income security policies, and union strength in key sectors of manufacturing and public employment that sustained the historic improvement in living standards until the end of the 1960s. A full understanding of the crisis that followed, starting with the "stagflation" that prompted the Nixon administration to institute wage controls and uncouple

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 74, Fall 2008, pp. 56–62
© 2008 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the dollar from the world economy, would require much more attention to economic developments than is to be found in the essay under discussion. But the authors spell out clearly the ascendancy of conservative politics accompanying that crisis. Nevertheless, even that change was by no means confined to the United States. While Nixon and Reagan won over votes of more privileged workers, it was England's Margaret Thatcher who showed how nationalization of industries and its electoral support could most effectively be dismantled. Moreover, in Britain as in the United States (and in much of continental Europe) racist hostility toward people of color migrating into industrial cities and jobs played a critical role in the realignment of electoral politics.

This persuasive portion of Cowie and Salvatore's argument does deserve some qualifications. Their descriptions of the limitations of the New Deal and later the Great Society leave unclear what is to be attributed to countermobilizations by business, what to the limited vision of liberal policymakers, and what to the aspirations and fears of workers. Jennifer Klein has dealt with the first of these questions—showing how business lobbies and especially insurance companies narrowed the scope of New Deal efforts to promote income security, even when they could not prevent such measures altogether. Ellis Hawley's careful scrutiny of differing schools of thought among those who framed economic policy and excellent studies of the role of gender in shaping relief and welfare policies by Linda Gordon, Theda Skocpol, Kenneth Casebeer, and others illuminate the controversies among liberal policy makers.[4]

Workers' organizations both sustained a drumbeat of criticisms of the inadequacies of New Deal legislation and administration and grew increasingly dependent on that administration, especially after the economic collapse late in 1937 and the electoral resurgence of conservatives in national and state elections of 1938. But among the varied and often contradictory effects of the war were an upsurge of Black and Chicano initiatives and leadership in labor unions in both the South and North.[5] As membership in unions continued to grow into the mid-1950s, living standards improved dramatically, as Cowie and Salvatore make clear, but workers' sense of power grew with them, even in the context of the Red Scare and Cold War. What David Brody has called "workplace contractualism" inspired self-assertion and dignity on the job—a sense of power every bit as important as the stimulus improved earnings gave to thoughts of home ownership, higher education, and better prospects for the children. As Jack Metzgar's book, which they cite approvingly, points out, the steel strike of 1959, the biggest collective action in the country's history, was all about work rules. In the Birmingham region, Black high school students whose parents had built the unions in local steel mills, pipe foundries, railroad yards, coal mining, and iron mining were the most prominent participants in street demonstrations against segregation.[6]

We need to remember also the programs then espoused by the dominant organizations of the labor movement, none of which were enacted by Congress. Resolutions adopted by the 1946 convention of the CIO projected

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a clear call for continuation of government controls over prices and the allocation of production materials, "development of atomic energy for civilian purposes under United Nations auspices," government sponsorship of housing to offset the failures of the market to provide for workers' urgent needs, and expansion of social security to encompass all agricultural, domestic, and maritime workers and to include health protection. Historians have devoted too little attention to the deep immersion of the AFL in lobbying for full-employment programs, a nationwide housing program, and expansion of social security. The rise of George Meany and of such staff officers as Boris Shishkin and Nelson Cruikshank highlights the AFL's change, despite the federation's resort to the discourse of "voluntarism." Meany's entire career was focused on state and national legislatures, not the bargaining table. From 1935 onward the AFL called for health insurance to be included in social security, and its leaders proved to be more consistently loyal to the cause of national health insurance well into the 1950s than was the CIO. After all, big industrial unions and giant corporations could incorporate medical insurance into their contracts far more easily than could unions and employers in construction, restaurant service, or trucking.[7]

In short, we need to know just who sought to impose what limitations on the New Deal and postwar governments. Cowie and Salvatore have found the answer to that question in the timeless obstacles of white supremacy (oddly described as the "unresolved issue of race"), religion, and the political culture of individualism. The Southern wing of the Democratic Party, the hostility of white workers in northern cities to racial integration of their neighborhoods, and the longstanding barriers posed by many, if not most, unions to hiring or promotion of black workers all receive the attention they deserve here. This essay also makes clear the decisive roles in the destruction of the New Deal coalition of the stampede of southern white voters from the Democratic to the Republican fold, the popularity of George Wallace in northern cities, and the preservation of white privilege behind a new discourse that disparaged all racial preferences.

The discussion of religion as an "issue" that "confronted New Deal liberalism" raises a subject of great importance for historians of the working class but treats it in a way that ends up ambiguous. The conclusion that "men and women could be deeply Catholic, active, even militant, trade unionists, and reject much of secular, liberal thought, while they simultaneously supported core economic aspects of New Deal policy" is well put. Certainly CIO President Philip Murray was an archetypal Catholic social justice advocate, whose proposals sought to augment the New Deal and the CIO, not to oppose it. To be sure, other Catholics threw their support to ardent foes of the New Deal, like Father Charles Coughlin and the violently anti-Semitic Christian Front, which was especially strong in Queens. But the social doctrines espoused by both Murray and Coughlin were far removed from the individualism celebrated by William Graham Sumner. Sumner scoffed at government intervention in the economy as a relic of "status" societies, which had fortunately been replaced

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by contractual relations. He had little in common with the very popular Father Edward McGlynn, who contended that the earthly implications of the gospel were enshrined in Henry George's teachings. McGlynn's excommunication had evoked large rallies by Catholic workers protesting the Pope's ruling.[8] Religion has never been a static, let alone a homogeneous, impulse.

The authors' discussion of Protestantism is even more limited. They identify white Protestantism either with William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes trial or with liberal individualism. Herbert Gutman, an author studiously neglected in this essay, carefully examined the pervasive influence of Protestant teachings in late nineteenth-century labor reform doctrines. Elizabeth and Kenneth Fones-Wolf have done pioneering studies of Protestant contributions to twentieth-century unionism. Back during the depression Liston Pope found that the core of white workers' support for the Communist-led Gastonia strike mainly came from some, but not all, Pentecostal churches. And were not many strikers in Akron, Ohio (known as the northernmost city of West Virginia and the city where the new Committee for Industrial Organization introduced itself to the public), members of the huge Baptist Temple?[9] To be sure, the preachings of Billy Sunday celebrated individual salvation and castigated collective action, but ardently prounion Methodist immigrant coal miners from Britain carried the union gospel from one pit town to another.[10] Religious beliefs and practice deserve close attention from labor historians, but they have played different political roles in different times and places.

The crucial problem arises when the authors seek to explain recent developments by conjuring up a timeless national culture rooted in "individualism." In the process they do not so much dispute a whole generation of research and writing on working-class history as simply ignore it. In its place they posit an individualistic political culture shared by all "the people," or at least all white people, which, they argue, has molded and limited political development in the United States since the nation's birth, and from which the New Deal represented a departure that could not prevail. To illustrate that durable political culture they bring forth William Graham Sumner's 1883 warning against what Presidents Reagan and Bush were later to call Big Government. In a famous lecture, which was also reissued by Yale University Press fifty years later on the eve of the New Deal, Sumner argued that "there can be no civil liberty anywhere unless rights are guaranteed against all abuses, as well from proletarians as from generals, aristocrats, and ecclesiastics." Politicians elected by voters with little or no property had to resist the temptation to lavish taxpayers' money on special interests and on the poor who would not care for themselves (offenses which Sumner lumped all together under the epithet "jobbery"). Such favors were dispensed at the expense of the honest and productive man, who was weighted down by the cost of schemes supposed "to make everyone happy."[11] "At bottom," Sumner wrote elsewhere in the same year, "there are two chief things with which government has to deal. They are the property of men and the honor of women."[12]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cowie and Salvatore point to the resurgence of Sumner's themes in the rhetoric of today's political leaders as evidence of the resilient character of American individualism. They might have added that the wages fund doctrine and the conception of progress as the movement from status to contract guide modernization theory and neoliberal economics in the twenty-first century much the way they informed the earlier species of liberalism espoused by Sumner. The first of these beliefs celebrates the accumulation of capital in private hands as the mainspring of job creation and economic growth. "Whatever you do for any of the petted classes wastes capital," declared Sumner.[13] The second imagines "individual men and women as self-contained, contract-making, utility-maximizing, and values-creating actors."[14] Only an economic catastrophe like that of the 1930s, the authors argue, could have deflected the nation's polity from those principles, and that only temporarily. The discourse cultivated by Nixon and Reagan thus becomes historical truth.

Had all, or even most Americans, been guided by these beliefs in the late nineteenth century, it would not have been necessary for Sumner to make his famous speech. Take his insistence that "the interest of the Forgotten Man and the interest of 'the poor,' 'the weak,' and the other petted classes are in antagonism."[15] All workers' organizations and also the ubiquitous immigrant societies and other fraternal orders operated on the understanding that anyone—even the most highly paid worker in this country, where wage differentials among workers were the widest in the industrial world—could be toppled into destitution by loss of a job, injury, illness, or death of a wage earner. Mutual insurance was a central principle of popular activity.[16] Moreover, in every economic downturn (that is to say every four or five years) trade unions, municipal officeholders, and street mobilizations demanded that city governments provide needy working people with jobs, shelter, and food. To be sure, some of those raising the demands for government assistance may even have agreed with Sumner that "the drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be," but even those who did so responded with self-imposed discipline of the unemployed encampments and Coxey's army of the 1890s.[17] The routine demands addressed by trade unions to local and state governments were summed up in the AFL programs, which while they rejected contributory governmental insurance, demanded the widespread creation of public works, municipal lodgings for homeless men, and repeal of state vagrancy laws.[18]

Both trade unions and the Knights of Labor taught that the worker confronting the wages system could achieve meaningful individuality only when individuals were sustained and protected by group solidarity. Mutuality was far more than occasional "brilliant flashes of solidarity," disturbing, though, those flashes may have been to Sumner. Social historians of the last fifty years have found it in workplace, community life, and local politics. Although the crisis of Reaganomics we are now entering is bound to nurture forms of solidarity different from those of the New Deal era, it will not be defined by the eternal verities of Sumner's Mythical Man.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

1. Jefferson R. Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, 1999); Cowie, "Nixon's Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969-1973," *Labor History* 43 (August 2002): 257–83.

2. Robert S. and Helen Merrill Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York, 1937), 419–60; Samuel Lubell, *Future of American Politics* (Third edition, New York, 1965); Richard Oestreicher, "Urban Working-Class Political Behavior and Theories of American Electoral Politics, 1870–1940," *Journal of American History* 74 (March, 1988): 1257–1286.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York, 1996), 306. On the 1950s leap in living standards around the world, see *ibid.,* 257–86.

4. Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public/Private Welfare State* (Princeton, 2003); Ellis W. Hawley, *New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* (Princeton, 1966); Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890–1935* (New York, 1994); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, 1992); Kenneth Casebeer, "The Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill: American Social Wage, Labor Organization, and Legal Ideology," in *Labor Law in America: Historical and Critical Essays*, ed. Christopher L. Tomlins and Andrew J. King (Baltimore, 1992), 231–59.

5. Horace Huntley and David Montgomery, *Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham* (Urbana, 2004), 12–24; Ruth Needleman, *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel: The Struggle for Democratic Unionism* (Ithaca, 2003); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, & Identity, 1930–1960* (New Haven, 1989); Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2005).

6. David Brody, *In Labor's Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker* (New York, 1993), 221–45; Jack Metzgar, *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (Philadelphia, 2000); Deborah E. McDowell, *Leaving Pipe Shop: Memories of Kin* (New York, 1996).

7. *Final Proceedings of the Eighth Constitutional Convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, November 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 1946. . .* (n.p.,n.d.), 42, 60, 74–5, 82–3, 152; Andrew E. Kersten, *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II* (New York, 2006); Alan Derickson, "Health Insurance for All? Social Unionism and Universal Health Insurance, 1935–1958," *Journal of American History* 80 (March, 1994): 1333–56. On Shishkin and Cruikshank, see Kersten, 191–212.

8. On Murray, see Charles McCollester, *Fighter with a Heart: Writings of Charles Owen Rice* (Pittsburgh, 1996), 59–117. On the Christian Front, see Philip Jenkins, *Hoods and Shirts: The Extreme Right in Pennsylvania, 1925–1950* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 165–91. The most informative source on McGlynn is Robert Emmett Curran's biography of his archenemy, *Michael Augustine Corrigan and the Shaping of Conservative Catholicism in America, 1878–1902* (New York, 1978).

9. Herbert G. Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," *American Historical Review* 72 (October, 1966): 74–101; Ken Fones-Wolf, *Trade Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865–1915* (Philadelphia, 1989); Liston Pope, *Millhands & Preachers, A Study of Gastonia*, (New Haven, 1942); Ruth McKenney, *Industrial Valley* (New York, 1939).

10. Robert Watchorn, *Autobiography of Robert Watchorn*, ed. by Herbert Faulkner West (Oklahoma City, 1958); Katherine A. Harvey, *Best-Dressed Miners: Life and Labor in the Maryland Coal Region, 1835–1910* (Ithaca, 1969), 114–8.

11. William Graham Sumner, *The Forgotten Man—Rediscovered After Fifty Years* (1933 reprint by Yale University Press of the 1883 speech). Among the instances of "jobbery" were not only aid to the "petted" poor and the "weak," but also sanitary, safety, and health regulations, river improvements, public buildings, pensions for war veterans, protective tariffs, and the spoils system (16–17, 24–29) . Sumner was consistent: He included military expenditures and imperialism in his catalogue of jobbery, in defiance of some Yale alumni who demanded his dismissal. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (revised edition,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Boston, 1955), 56–64. See also the perceptive discussion of Sumner in Nancy Cohen, *Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 148–59.

12. William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York, 1883), 88.

13. Sumner, *Forgotten Man*, 30.

14. Wilfred M. McClay quoted by Cowie and Salvatore above in note 8.

15. Sumner, *Forgotten Man*, 30.

16. See August Sartorius von Waltershausen, *The Workers' Movement in the United States, 1879–1885*, ed. David Montgomery and Marcel van der Linden (Cambridge, 1998), 171–230.

17. Sumner, *Forgotten Man,* 16; Carlos C. Closson, Jr., "The Unemployed in American Cities," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 8 (January 1894): 168–217, 257–8; Carlos A. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln, NE, 1985); David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1993), 145–57.

18. Alexander Keyssar, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts* (New York, 1986), 211–15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547908000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press