Getting New Deal History Wrong

Nancy MacLean
Northwestern University

Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have written an ambitious and provocative essay. Ranging across more than a hundred years of history in less than half as many manuscript pages, it seeks to unlock deep secrets of the American past. The New Deal, Cowie and Salvatore argue, constitutes a lone "long exception" in a history otherwise determined by "a deep and abiding individualism" so definitive of U.S. political culture that it dooms any radical rupture in advance. Presenting themselves as realists, Cowie and Salvatore claim that their interpretation of the long sweep of national history "can provide a more stable intellectual foundation on which to build discussions of present and future politics." I disagree, and the reasons why matter.

Much as I admire the previous books of these scholars, this essay falls short of the high standards set by that work. It presents an unpersuasive account of the history it promises to explain, in an analysis characterized by obliviousness to the experiences, practices, and ideas of social groups other than northern white men. Ironically, it also shares considerable ground with the Right's interpretation of the New Deal. Conservatives, since their movement's founding in the mid-1950s, have insisted that the New Deal state was a radical departure from the individualistic core values and traditions of America. The welfare state lost support in recent years, they maintain, because the American people came back to their senses and remembered the virtues of free markets and personal responsibility. Where conservatives crow, Cowie and Salvatore mourn, but their narratives converge.

To be clear, I have no quarrel with the piece's claim that in the harsh light of a quarter-century of conservative ascendency, the New Deal now appears as "a long exception" in a political economy otherwise hostile to the collective claims of working people. The disagreement is over how to explain this. Notwithstanding some gestures toward social history (in particular labor weakness, racial division, and religious commitment), their explanation stresses a widely shared and unchanging culture of "deep and abiding individualism." Cowie and Salvatore don't simply present a culturalist argument, as many analyses of recent years do. They conceive of culture in a strange way, as a kind of animate force independent of its human bearers. Activists find themselves enchained by "the historic constraints of their political culture," "the deeper impulses of American history" drive action, and "the deepest currents of American history" wash other ideas from the minds of actors.

To appreciate how this interpretation skirts serious analysis of the complex dynamics of US history, consider its anchoring equation between William Graham Sumner and Richard M. Nixon. Cowie and Salvatore would focus our attention on the "continuity" between the two, particularly their shared

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fealty to the "founding mythos of individualism [that] has structured our collective life." Well, let's think about this. Does it matter that Sumner's "individualism" encompassed only white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men, whose national government was pretty much confined to running the postal service, paying veterans' pensions, and waging war on Indians? Is it significant that Nixon, in contrast, whether or not he wanted to, had to acknowledge Catholics, Jews, African Americans, Mexican Americans and women of all groups as citizens and somehow reconcile the idea of "individualism" with a vast federal state whose operations ranged from maintaining a global empire abroad to addressing environmental degradation and occupational health and safety at home?

In making a timeless, universal individualism all-explanatory, Cowie and Salvatore have fallen back on a version of consensus history more simplistic than that of the much-maligned Richard Hofstadter. He at least recognized the reality of pervasive conflict in the American past and sought to understand how pitched clashes forced change in the terms of consensus.[1] Traces of those contests appear in the very speeches cited here, as Sumner seeks to turn his listeners against the "petted classes" and Nixon to rally his against the "shouters" and "demonstrators." But Cowie and Salvatore seem uninterested in the contestation, or in empirical gauges of the success of the speakers' efforts at containment. That's a pity, because if they had asked about outcomes, they would have had to reckon with the strike wave that answered Sumner's odes to self-reliance, and with the continuing widespread support for core New Deal and Great Society programs that survived Nixon, restrained Ronald Reagan, and defeated George W. Bush's attempts to privatize Social Security.

Throughout their piece, Cowie and Salvatore avoid engagement with the realities of economic, political, and cultural *power*. They largely ignore the unrivaled sway of American capital, the constraints built into the US Constitution (hence American law and politics) by its slaveholding designers, and the grassroots social movement organizing–left and right–that has dramatically altered the exercise of power in the United States. The authors offer, in effect, the latest in a long line of musings on "why no socialism in America?" while taking us backward from helpful efforts to reformulate that question in recent decades.[2] A look at the three pivotal eras in their narrative will illustrate the problems.

The New Deal stands at the center of their story. What enabled this unique era of union-building and new departures in national policy? The authors gesture to the economic cataclysm, altered workplaces, limited immigration, and new union leadership. But there is surprisingly little attention to the brass-tacks process that produced the New Deal. Notably absent is the international context, with fascism and Communism as rival specters haunting American decision making. Also missing is the Left at home, particularly the Communist Party, which helped to set the agenda in arenas from unemployment compensation and union organizing to racial justice. Without those elements in play, it's difficult to explain the radicalization of Franklin D. Roosevelt after his election on a balanced budget platform or appreciate why some capitalists came to rethink their self-interest in more sustainable ways. Also lacking is analysis of

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the ill-gotten and enormous power of southern white conservatives in Congress, whose veritable chokehold over legislation better explains, say, why the United States has no universal healthcare than does enduring individualism.[3] Lacking both radicals and conservatives as actors, these authors depict the New Deal as an emanation from the heads of "liberals." The liberals, largely unidentified, are then criticized for not doing the work of socialists.

As the story advances into the 1940s, readers encounter anticommunism without having made the acquaintance of any kind of radicalism. "The Cold War," Cowie and Salvatore assert, "actually enhanced the New Deal order's political strength." Really? Where, one wonders, is the use its opponents made of anticommunism, particularly in the South, where the battle raged fiercest, but even in liberal bastions like New York City?[4] It's impossible to understand from this rendering why it was that so many employers imagined they had lost vital powers and why southern white conservatives were so alarmed about the security of their rule. It sounds like the whole national family just woke up one day to rediscover the gospel of individualism.

Absent is serious treatment of the determined organizing over decades by ideological conservatives, who allied with recalcitrant employers and southern segregationists to roll back core elements of the New Deal order. That coalition began to come together as early as 1937–1938 but really gained momentum with the founding of the *National Review* in 1955 and the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater in 1964. When conservative movement builders surveyed the country, what they found hegemonic was not individualism but "statism," "collectivism," and what one bemoaned as "the characteristic leveling egalitarianism of [our] time."[5] The aggressive fight they waged against the New Deal state and its "rights revolution" progeny far better explains the vulnerability of those policies today than does a shared political culture.

Conservatives' most efficacious tool in their quest to turn the public against provision for the common good was prejudice widely shared among white voters, particularly racism, but also antifeminism, and most recently homophobia.[6] The Achilles' heel of Cowie and Salvatore's interpretation is thus their lack of knowledge about the politics of race and gender. Throughout, they seem at pains to deny the abiding material inequality enabled by racism and sexism. How else can one make sense of such tendentious distinctions as calling African Americans and women "social—but not economic—groups"—when in fact their distinctive economic standing inspired activism from rank-and-file caucuses in unions to the welfare rights movement and the quest to break open white men's monopoly of the skilled trades? Oddly, too, Cowie and Salvatore discuss Black Power with no recognition of its advocates' concern with economic oppression.

The authors simply don't see the mechanisms sustaining white and male advantage as core features of the US political economy. They fail to appreciate how what has been variously called racialized social democracy, gendered public policy, and the two-track welfare state has shaped the consciousness of whites as well as blacks, and men as well as women. They seem unaware that their nostalgic invocation of "the shared material world of the New Deal" and "collective

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economic citizenship" of that era ill fits the actual sifting and privileging done by a policy regime they depict as the apex of universalism, before the siren call of "individual and group rights."[7]

Not appreciating how central race and gender were to earlier political economy and culture, Cowie and Salvatore stumble badly in trying to explain what happened in the sixties. They fall into the tired centrist argument that, in effect, blames the new social movements for the weakness of labor politics and the spiking of inequality. Indeed, they would have readers believe that these movements lacked any "collective economic vision." It's an account that ignores, for example, Martin Luther King's 1963 call for a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged in *Why We Can't Wait* and his route to the Memphis sanitation workers strike in 1968. Cowie and Salvatore turn a blind eye to how civil rights leaders sought to bring the supposedly lost "economic liberalism of the New Deal" to black communities devastated by automation, as it was then called, unemployment, and redlining. Nor do the authors show awareness of how feminists worked to extend the New Deal framework into the realm of care-giving with such efforts as paid parental leave, universal childcare, and reproductive rights.[8] Cowie and Salvatore fail to see how the racially and gender-bifurcated New Deal over time lost the allegiance of many of its prime beneficiaries precisely because of its in-built faultlines. By the 1970s, millions of white working-class men who became "middle-class" thanks to new labor laws, union contracts, FHA loans and GI Bill benefits just couldn't see why they should shell out taxes for those who needed more visible government assistance—those whom conservatives encouraged them to see as black, immoral, and unworthy.[9]

In Cowie and Salvatore's account, it is not such white men who spoil social democratic possibilities by ushering in resurgent "individualism," but civil rights activists and feminists. Their "collective-sounding left rhetoric" was merely a smokescreen, Cowie and Salvatore want us to agree, for a selfish "core" politics "that could be perfectly aligned with enlightened corporate policy." Here, the authors overlook what organizers actually worked for in these years—as opposed to what they got. It seems never to dawn on Cowie and Salvatore that the civil rights movement, in particular, might have been *more* social-democratic than an AFL-CIO dominated by the building trades. Nor do they recognize that black activism was what put egalitarian visions of "the common good" back on the national agenda. In their rendering, liberalism is totally defined by whites, and African American organizing for justice bizarrely appears as a liability to progressive politics. The authors thus manage to discuss the War on Poverty without acknowledging that it never would have been attempted without the civil rights struggle having brought economic injustice back into national discussion. Worse, they ascribe the limits of the War on Poverty solely to the defects of its backers. They seem unaware of the constraints exercised by the alliance of southern segregationists and northern business Republicans whom Martin Luther King called "the tragic coalition" and whom Lyndon Johnson refered to as "the great beast."[10] In short, they ignore the gathering Republican right.

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The weakness of the narrative by the 1970s thus results partly from the lack of any power analysis, in organizers' jargon, of what enabled the right's success. Missing just how radical the challenges of the sixties were to established hierarchies and to corporate legitimacy, Cowie and Salvatore fail to appreciate the degree to which the conservative movement's project was self-consciously counterrevolutionary. Nor do they make any attempt to trace the ways its builders worked through organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the American Conservative Union, and right-wing think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation in what one pundit aptly termed a "revolt of the haves."[11]

The post-1960s section of the essay loses its way due to a core conceptual problem: when Cowie and Salvatore think "working class," they envision only white men in northern unions of waning power. They simply do not view black and brown men or women of any background as working-class agents whose actions might matter. Their narrative therefore fails to recognize how the post-1960s labor movement benefitted from the organizing of African Americans, Mexican Americans, women of varied groups, and lately, new immigrants. That failure to see what is in plain sight is the more noteworthy because several distinguished historians have documented such revitalization, not infrequently in debates with opponents making the very same tendentious, declensionist arguments as Cowie and Salvatore.[12]

Cowie and Salvatore's interpretation thus exhibits a willful blindness. Isn't it long past time to give up the ideologically driven and empirically untenable dichotomy between "class politics" and "identity politics"? Shouldn't evidence-minded scholars recognize that without the activism of antiracists and feminists the growth of inequality in the United States in recent decades would have been *worse*? Who has done the best organizing for "a collective economic vision" centered on "the common good" since the sixties? Was it the backward-looking "forgotten men" who haunt this essay? No, it was those who proved willing to learn from the social movements of that era, ranging from civil rights to feminism, gay rights, and the fight in the fields waged by Mexican Americans—among them white men such as John Wilhelm of UNITE HERE, Andrew Stern of SEIU, and Wade Rathke of ACORN.[13]

Cowie and Salvatore intend for their piece to be more than an interpretation of history. They proffer it as a guide to a smarter progressive politics. But what are the implications of an analysis that has slighted political economy, social movement organizing, the historic contribution of the left to changing the terms of national debate, the rise of the right, and the role of contingency in history? Not surprisingly, barring "major national shocks" such as the Great Depression, Cowie and Salvatore deny the potential for significant change. The authors urge readers to realize how "the most powerful aspects of American political culture have proven resistant" to "dissenting movements." In an era characterized by the worst economic inequality and the meanest conservative politics since Sumner's time, Cowie and Sumner counsel "skepticism" and "smaller" vision.

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Ironically, the authors urge us to think small just as Democratic voters, fed up by a quarter-century of conservative ascendency, crave "change" and "hope." Even conservatives' own pollsters and strategists foresee a potentially historic realignment. If students accepted the argument that Cowie and Salvatore advance here, they would likely ask why bother to study American history because it is so predetermined. If activists took it seriously, they'd go catatonic. Why examine past experience, much less sacrifice and take risks, if the hegemony of limiting ideas has been ensured in advance? Cowie and Salvatore have modeled such aloof disengagement in their own lack of curiosity about the social movements of our time. They are certain, *a priori,* that everything from immigrant rights organizing to lesbian and gay demands for recognition of their families to global antisweatshop activism will be channeled back into a pinched individualism that makes these causes, at their core, indistinguishable from Sumner and Nixon, so why should they learn more about them? Is such an approach helpful, intellectually or politically? I don't think so.

The greatest irony, in fact, is the false dichotomy on which the entire argument depends. Cowie and Salvatore use "individualism" as a pejorative term; they imagine it as the binary opposite of solidarity and commitment to the common good. But isn't *any* popular movement in the wake of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the democratic revolution bound to appeal to personal conviction and aspiration as forces for social change? Didn't Salvatore demonstrate this dialectic brilliantly in his biography of the great socialist, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen and Socialist*? It's a shame that Cowie and Salvatore refuse to trouble their certainties by engaging the rich literature on civil rights and feminism. In it they would have found some of the most sophisticated accounts in print of how working-class people overcome fatalism: typically, by realizing—with organizers' encouragement—their inherent worth as individuals. Group after group has found in that "individualistic" conviction the power to fight for a better world for all.[14]

NOTES

1. "Conflict and Consensus in American History," in Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), 437–466.

2. See, for example, Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?" *History Workshop* 17 (Spring 1984): 57–80.

3. Among others, see Colin Gordon, *Dead on Arrival: The Politics of Health Care in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2004); Jill Quadagno, *One Nation, Uninsured: Why the U.S. Has No National Health Insurance* (Oxford, 2005); Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger and Daniel Kryder, "Limiting Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933–1950," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), pp. 283–306.

4. See, for example, Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, 2002); Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2005); George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945–1965 (*Gainesville, FL, 2004); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South,*

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1948–1968 (Baton Rouge, 2004); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

5. Quote from Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 46. See also chapters 2 and 7; George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York, 1976), and Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, 2001); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York, 2009), and her many articles on this theme.

6. This history is summarized and the vast literature cited in my essay, "Guardians of Privilege," in Donald Critchlow and Nancy MacLean, *Debating the Conservative Movement: 1945 to the Present* (Lanham, MD, 2008).

7. For introductions to the now vast literature on these themes, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in America* (New York, 2005); Linda Gordon, ed., *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Madison, 1990); Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford, 2001).

8. For recent works on these well-established patterns, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton, 2003); Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, 2007); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York, 2007).

9. See, for a sampling, Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*; Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2003); Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton, 2003); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, 2003).

10. See note 7 above; also Dona C. Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York, 1997); MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough* (which Cowie and Salvatore enlist in ways that grossly distort my findings). For a brilliant study that confounds the artificial dichotomy they create between the New Deal and unionism, on one hand, and feminism, civil rights, and welfare rights organizing, on the other, see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* (Boston, 2005).

11. Early entries in a now-vast literature include Thomas Byrne Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (New York, 1984); Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn*: *The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York, 1986); Michael Lind, "Conservative Elites and the Counterrevolution against the New Deal," *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

12. See, for example, the three decades of such interventions in Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana, 2007); David Roediger, "What If Labor Were Not White and Male?: Recentering Working-Class History and Reconstructing the Debate on the Unions and Race," *ILWCH* 51 (Spring 1997): 72-95; Robin D.G. Kelley, "Identity Politics and Class Struggle," *New Politics* 6 (Winter 1997); Dorothy Sue Cobble, "A 'Tiger by the Toenail': The 1970s Origins of the New Working-Class Majority," *Labor* 2 (Fall 2005): 103–114.

13. For examples of this kind of learning, see Jo-Ann Mort, ed., *Not Your Father's Union Movement* (New York, 1998); Vanessa Tait, *Poor Workers Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below* (Cambridge, 2005); Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York, 2006); Janice Fine, *Workers Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca, 2006).

14. Examples include Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 2007); Orleck, *Storming Caesar's Palace*; and, with a different explanatory project, Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Rutgers University Press, 1987).

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