Wine, War, and the New Deal

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Good afternoon, and thank you. I'm grateful for the chance to talk to you about my research.

I know you've got a number of candidates speaking today, so to remind you briefly which one I am: my name is Eric Rauchway, and I'm Distinguished Professor of History at the University of California, Davis.

Since receiving my PhD in 1996 I've written seven, or I suppose technically eight books; the fifth is not a work of history so it's a bit like John Hurt in *Doctor Who,* it doesn't affect the official numbering scheme. My first three books focus on the decades around 1900, the period historians of the United States still generally call "the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," and then starting with my fourth book I moved a bit forward in time to focus more on the 1930s and 1940s, or more precisely the Great Depression, New Deal, and Second World War. My period of research expertise thus extends roughly from the Civil War to the Second World War, although lately I've pushed it a bit forward to the middle 1970s.

My own approach to these years has emphasized the role of international factors on the Untied States, considered in a variety of ways. I've tried to unify an understanding of broad, quantifiable social or economic trends with the stories of individual personalities, both exemplary and consequential.

My topical expertise focuses approximately on what our colleagues refer to as "policy history," as distinct from political history—that is, I'm interested not only in how institutions and political figures attain and use power, but how their policies affect the population, and in turn, how those effects get translated via various feedback channels into new politics, and demands for new policies.

So, for example, my book on the McKinley assassination didn't really have all that much to do with the assassination itself or the presidents unseated and seated as a consequence, so much as it took the story of the assassin—the child of immigrants, someone who moved back and forth between farm and factory, someone documentably involved with almost every characteristic incident and insult of industrial life at the turn of the century—as a microcosm of the pressures building up in the United States in the 1890s, which found their outlet when funneled through the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt.

Similarly, my interest in the period between the election of 1932 and Roosevelt's first inauguration in 1933 has to do with what—to the extent we can tell—US voters in the aggregate thought they could expect from a Roosevelt presidency, and how Hoover represented a class of people terrified of those expectations, while Roosevelt represented a class of people terrified of what would happen if those expectations were not fulfilled. For the New Dealers, democracy—or what then passed for it in the United States—itself was at stake; the New Deal had more to do with preserving and extending democracy in the United States than it did with the economy per se; economic recovery was a means to that democratizing end. I fleshed out this idea, of the campaign promises of 1932 and voters' expectations, with an eye to the historiography on the campaign, and was gratified to discover that another scholar, working from a different source base, had discovered much the same as I, about voters' differing expectations of the candidates.[1]

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I developed this idea a bit further in *Why the New Deal Matters,* which focuses on the ideology with which New Dealers invested their public works programs, and what that tells us about the state New Dealers sought to build—that is, one that was conducive

[1] Helmut Norpoth, "The American Voter in 1932: Evidence from a Confidential Survey," *PS* 52, no. 1 (January 2019): 14--19; Eric Rauchway, "The New Deal Was on the Ballot in 1932," *Modern American History* 2, no. 2 (July 2019): 201–13.

to democratization, even if it was not actually democratic yet.

New Deal public works served the macroeconomic purpose of countering unemployment, but more important, they served an ideological purpose. As Roosevelt wrote, direct employment would

> help restore the close relationship with the people which is necessary to preserve our democratic form of government[2]

The essence of the modern condition might be alienation from the great structures of government, but direct public employment could alleviate that alienation, and thus strengthen democracy. Direct public employment at a sufficiently large scale could also, practically, permit the government to influence wages and working conditions even for private employers by setting yardsticks and competing for laborers.

The public works themselves, ubiquitous and everyday as they were, also put Americans in touch with the federal government. They demonstrated that, no matter who Americans were or where they lived, they mattered; they deserved the solicious attention of the government—a government that belonged to them—in Washington DC.

Following the lines of the land

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In making this argument, I'm entering a historiographical discussion about the nature of the New Deal state, which envisions it as "high modernist" on the one hand, and neoliberal on the other; I don't think either is correct. The New Deal's mark on American

[2] Eric Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 32.

institutions and on the American landscape was quite the opposite of the states critiqued by James C. Scott and others; Scott has an aside in the introduction to *Seeing Like a State* where he says that he had a chapter on the New Deal as an example of "high-modernist" policy and construction, but he had to drop it for length; I rather suspect he was slightly fibbing—the problem was instead that the New Deal state looked and worked differently from the other case studies he had—it took account of local knowledge, climate, and geography; and also sought to promote democracy.[3]

For every high-modernist Norris Dam, you would also have something like the walkable planned workers' community of Norris. The TVA's remit was not some arbitrary bureaucratic boundary, but rather the watershed of the Tennessee River itself. Its program for sustainable agriculture included literally following, rather than rationalizing, the lines of the land.

To be sure, the New Deal's respect for existing local structures was sometimes at odds with its push for democracy, especially in the South. And the Democratic Party could not forever, or even very long, remain the party both of the white South and of newly organized Black voters.

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[3] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 6.