Wine, War, and the New Deal

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Good afternoon and thank you for giving me some of your time today.

I recognize you may be attending a series of these talks today in which people try to give you a summary of their careers to date and to come, so I'll remind you which one I am: my name is Eric Rauchway and I'm Distinguished Professor of History at the University of California at Davis. Since earning my PhD from Stanford in 1996 I've written seven books of history, which leaves us a nice empty spot on this slide like the fourth plinth in Trafalgar; later on I'll talk a little bit about what goes there.

My earlier books focused on the decades around 1900, which historians still call, not without some qualms, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. My own contribution to the literature was to situate the US process of industrialization at the center of material international trends: that is, I examined how immigration, trade, and global finance affected the US reaction to industrial concentration, and how those factors help us understand why Progressivism looked and sounded as it did.

That interest in the process of economic globalization around 1900 involved looking at some key drivers of the Great Depression, and my latter four books focus on the period of the Depression and the New Deal. I've made contributions to this literature in agricultural and monetary policy, and also in our understanding of the kind of state New Dealers built; more on that in a moment.

In all these projects, my method has involved study of broad, quantifiable social trends combined with the stories of individual persons who exemplify or affect those trends. My book on the McKinley assassination is less about McKinley or Theodore Roosevelt than about the assassin Czolgosz, and what his story tells us about immigration, industrialization, depression, labor, radicalism, and sexuality at the turn of the century.

Similarly, *Winter War*, my book on the period between the 1932 election and Franklin Roosevelt's first inauguration, is about Hoover and Roosevelt, but also about the forces refracted through their presidencies—and specifically, the citizenry mobilized in 1932 in a way that looked hopeful to many Americans, and alarming to many others.[1]

In my work on the New Deal—which includes not only the four books but the article in the journal *Modern American History* and the chapter in the recent collection, *Myth America,* as well as various shorter works—I've come to emphasize the ideological work the New Deal did over the material work, though both were highly significant.

New Deal macroeconomic policy was generally sound, but also secondary to political aims. Economic recovery, while always a goal of the New Deal, was subsidiary to the aim of reinvigorating and extending democracy in the United States (attenuated though it was).[2]

It's therefore a mistake to think about the New Deal solely or even mainly in terms of economic stimulus. Public works were not merely about employment: they were also about transforming Americans' conception of what the state was and who it was for.

When asked to name New Deal public works, people will often mention major landmarks—Shasta Dam, the Bay Bridge—or fine arts, like public murals. This focus on the more glamorous works omits the vital and ubiquitous efforts—the playgrounds, the community centers, the roads and perhaps especially the sidewalks—that not only employed more people but affected more people, and created an infrastructure of public space. The ubiquity, the mundanity, of New Deal public works was itself an

[1] Eric Rauchway, *Winter War: Hoover, Roosevelt, and the First Clash over the New Deal* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

[2] Eric Rauchway, "The New Deal," in *Myth America: Historians Take On The Biggest Legends and Lies About Our Past*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer (New York: Basic Books, 2022), 141–53; Eric Rauchway, "The New Deal Was on the Ballot in 1932," *Modern American History* 2, no. 2 (July 2019): 201–13.

ideological statement: it said to Americans, the government at Washington works for you, just as you work for it.

Second, when thinking about the ideological character of New Deal public works, we should note that the government at Washington may have set the framework for these efforts but it did not compose or manage them. I enter here a debate about the New Deal state, to say that it was not a top-down, high-modernist structure such as those described and critiqued in James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State,* but rather a decentralized, and decentralizing, state.

Scott has a sentence in his introduction about the New Deal; he says he did have a section on the Tennessee Valley Authority, which he describes as a "high-modernist experiment." But he says this section was "reluctantly swept aside to shorten what is still a long book."[3]

Honestly, I'm reasonably sure this is a bit of a fib. I think Scott dropped his discussion of the TVA because it didn't fit the top-down, bureaucratized, rationalizing state whose shortcomings he catalogued.

That is to say, the TVA was not a top-down imposition on the landscape; rather, it was regionalized—headquartered in Knoxville, Tennessee—and to a degree democratized, its decision-making pushed down to local farmers' cooperatives that TVA leaders helped organize.

For every plausibly "high modernist" TVA project, like Norris Dam, there was a community like the town of Norris, with its winding footpaths and workers' housing; the lines of the TVA were not the arbitrary impositions of a central state but the lines of the land itself—the river watershed and the contours of the valley.

[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.

Many components of the New Deal state were similar—considerate of local knowledge in an effort to render their work appealing and sustainable. You may be thinking that solicitude of local knowledge might sometimes conflict with the New Deal state's democratizing agenda, and you would be correct, particularly in the Tennessee Valley, which is to say the South, where Black workers were Roosevelt's constituents and more enthusiastic about the New Deal's potential than their segregationist white neighbors, who were also Democrats. But the New Deal provided a framework whereby these competing impulses could be held in tension, at least for a time.[4]

My most recent work, which I've done together with Kathy Olmsted, covers the New Deal and the California wine industry, and provides an opportunity to prove these observations in a different area. I gather you'll have heard an overview of this project already so I'm going to focus in a little on the portion relating to the New Deal.

Alcohol was a special case of New Deal policy: repeal of Prohibition was one of the first policies of the Roosevelt administration and arguably had its own support independent of the New Deal. But it was a special case that nevertheless exemplifies general principles: the Democrats ran on repeal in part as a policy to spur economic activity by rendering production, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages legal; the appeal of repeal mapped neatly onto the appeal of other New Deal policies with various ethnic and racial minorities.[5]

And of course the wine industry was central to the state of California and people's sense of California as a state recovering from Depression, as the New Deal murals in Coit Tower, in San Francisco, suggest.

[4] See discussions of the TVA, as well as grazing and Native policies, in Eric Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

[5] Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016); Eric Schickler, "New Deal Liberalism and Racial Liberalism in the Mass Public, 1937–1968," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 1 (March 2013): 75–98; Robert Elliot Chiles, *The Revolution of '28: Al Smith, American Progressivism, and the Coming of the New Deal* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

More important, the state that emerged from repeal resembled the New Deal state in ways I've already described: it was not so centralized or high-modernist, and far more solicitous of local knowledge and considerations than one might predict.

What you see here are examples of many documents from what later became the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms for the period during and just after Prohibition.

This is an interview with a man named John Columbero, an immigrant from Italy who had come to the United States, who'd been naturalized in 1927, who farmed grapes and now built his own tanks to make wine because he had to, as he says. He had good credit, but not very much of it. As the playwright Tony Kushner says in *Angels in America,* the ones who crossed the ocean, they're not just a person but a whole kind of person. And here Columbero's applied to make and sell wine in 1933, so he'll be ready to do it just as soon as repeal is fully in effect.

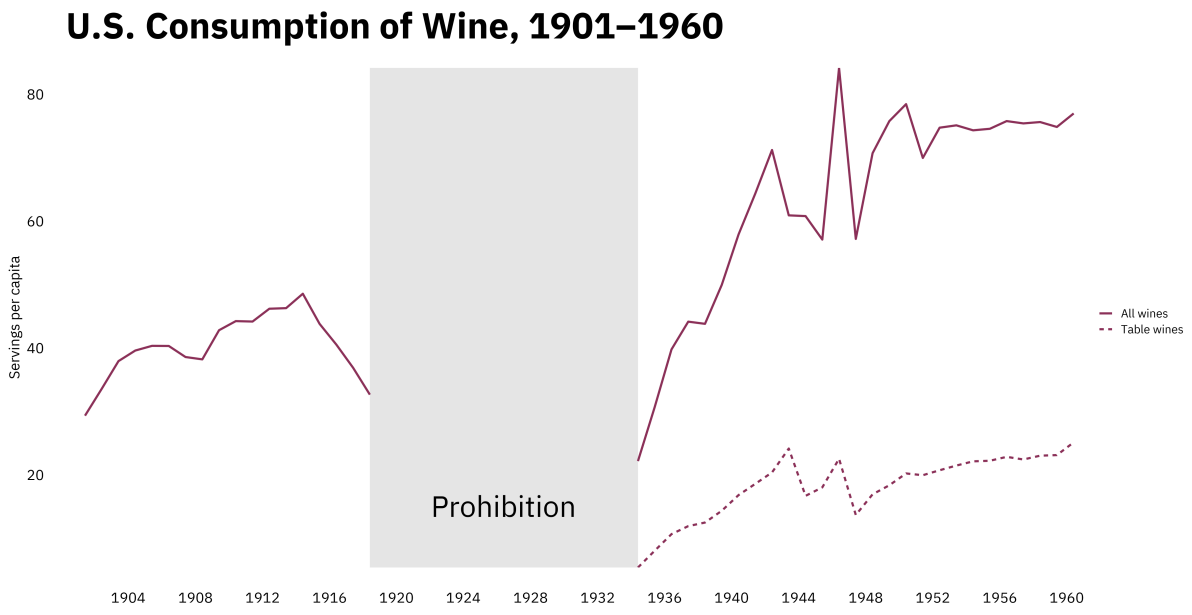
Now note what he says here: he wants to make only dry wine. He's ambitious. This is a time when most of the wine Americans consume is sherry, port, madeira—strong, sweet wine. They got used to it, during Prohibition, because it offered bang-for-buck. They lost the taste for dry, less alcoholic table wine, which—tellingly—they'd come to refer to as sour wine.

But Columbero and people like him wanted to make what they thought of as good wine, quality wine, healthful wine—the kind of wine they'd had in their youth. Here's his logo, "Fountain of Youth." The New Deal helped promote the idea that wine, unlike beer or liquor, was healthy—it was good food, it went with a meal. New Deal agencies therefore promoted quality control—but not as an imposition from above.

Here, in an excellent example, when they wanted to imitate the French system of place-name control—they didn't draw a map in Washington, or even in Sacramento; rather, they went to people like Columbero and said, what's the territory, the terroir, that should be designated by your name? How can we control its use? Or specifically, when they actually went to Columbero himself:

They asked, what are "the boundaries of the 'Cucamonga District,' describing such boundaries by rivers, mountain ranges, railways, highways or other easily identified features of topography, or preferably, by submitting a map." And Colubero obliged, on the basis that "Cucamonga wine has established a very good name on the market and at present demands a premium." He, and others like him, wanted to protect what they'd produced.

Note, too, that the operation of this state is very solicitous, as I say, of local knowledge rather than "high-modernist" in nature.



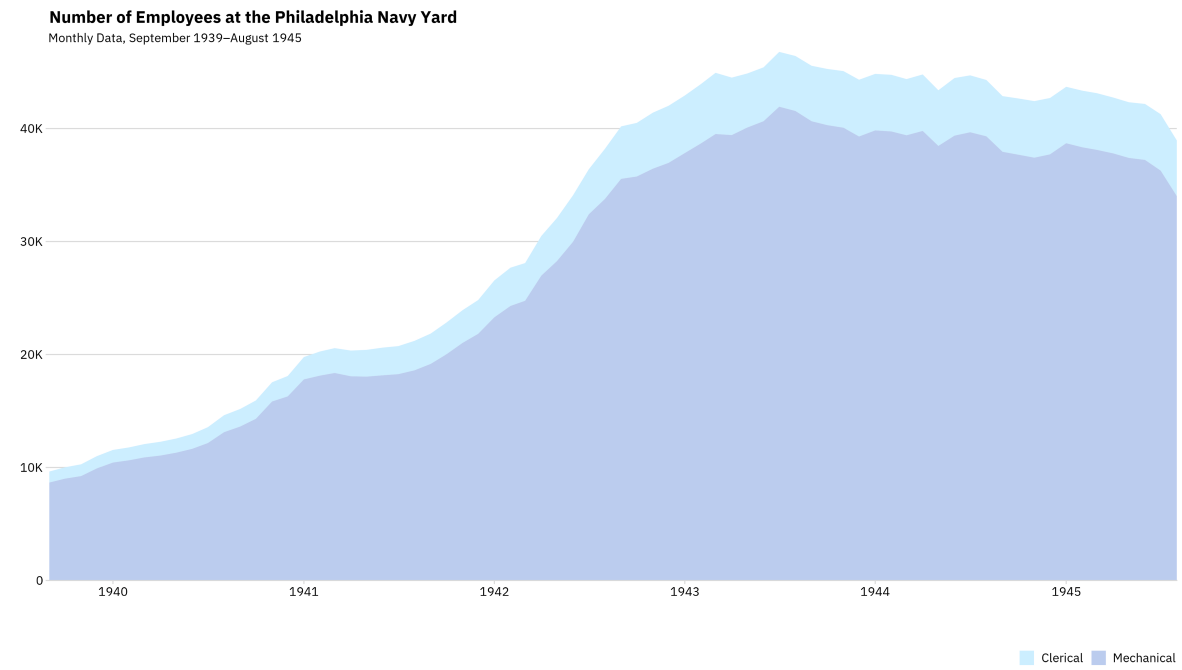
Data for all wines from Kym Anderson and Vicente Pinilla (with the assistance of A.J. Holmes), "Annual Database of Global Wine Markets, 1835–2019," August 2021; data for table wines from the Wine Institute, which does not keep pre-Prohibition statistics. Servings defined as 1.5 ounces. "All wines" includes dessert wines, vermouth, sparkling, and table wines; "table wines" refers to still wines not exceeding 14% alcohol by volume. Figures reflect only the recorded, i.e., legal, market.

There's a lot more to be said about process, but let's consider results. The New Deal's promotion of the wine industry was effective—not only in seeing to the increase of consumption overall, but to the rise of dry table wine, like the Cucamonga wines Columbero produced, the quality wines.

So that's the kind of thing we're looking into: the role of the state with respect to immigrants, laborers, business, and consumers in the rapid recovery of the California wine industry, which went from unlawful to best in the world in about four decades. We think this has useful lessons for the state's role in vital industries in the face of crises, like the climate crisis now upon us.

You can see, too, an increase in the planting of higher quality grapes, spurred by state funded programs and documented, in the data that underlie this chart, by New Deal programs.

A war for the New Deal



I want to conclude by indicating what my next-next book will be: a history of what I'm calling the war for the New Deal; the promotion of aid to the Allies, mainly Britain, in the years 1939–1941, within the United States; justified by persuading the American people and, increasingly, people overseas, that the war would aim not merely to stop Nazism, but to establish an international commitment to human rights; that is, that it would be a war for the New Deal. This meant not only legal and philosophical justifications for intervention, but what you might call the spreading of vernacular interventionism—that's how you get the numbers of workers ramping up here in the years 1939–1941, long before the attack on Pearl Harbor shifted the justification to retaliation. I'll be happy to talk a bit about that in the Q&A, if you'd like to ask about it.

But there is where I'd like to leave it, having sketched a brief history of my history of the New Deal state, and its particular and vital character. I'm happy to take your questions on all this stuff, or indeed on anything I didn't manage to cover, like my TLS essays or other public work. Thank you.