

Tutorial 7, AY2014/2015- The US between the Wars

Alan Brinkley, "Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1920-1945" in Eric Foner, ed The New American History (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 133-151

Alan Brinkley's treatment of the years 1920-1945 is a survey of how historians have analyzed this important period.

- Summarize what different historians have said about the 25 years.
- Why have the interpretations changed and evolved since the 1950s?

Schelesinger

- American history cyclical
- "continuing shift in national involvement, between public purpose & private interest"
- reform periods → private goals → reform

Consensus scholarship

- critical of Americans' values and institutions
- "universal commitment to economic self-aggrandizement through competitive capitalism"
- limits of reform

Barry Karl

- failure of society to nationalise, resisted unity, survival of localism and tradition
- "fewest commitment to preserve individual liberties" prevented clear definition of a nation.

Lewis Galambos

- organizational histories
- important changes in history stem from small/intimate/local/regional groups to large scale/national/formal organisations.

New Left

- decline of pure democracy; increasing influence of private institutions & growing influence over government → people less able to control circumstances of their work & lives.

new works preceding new ways to examine the past; new ideas/values

① 1920-1930s a period of sharp discontinuity.

- American mindset of materialism
- cultural upheavals as result of conflict between new secular/urban culture vs. rural/traditional fearful of change from New Era
- KKK not just about racism/changing racial norms, but also about "combating moral laxness of modern life" i.e. traditional, pre-civil war.
- different views of consumerism and effects
 - eg. ending traditional values for materialistic ones
 - force for liberation and fulfillment
- TL;DR: materialism replaced older, traditional values.
- political retreat, reaction, stagnation.

② 1920s-1930s contained elements of progressive impulses

- survival of pre-WWI progressive elements
- Republican policies more active and innovative; rational org. and scientific planning to economic affairs.
- federal role in managing economy championed by Herbert Hoover.
- federal action to deal with GD, laying groundwork for New Deal
- TL;DR: New Deal not a sharp deviation from conservative past but a continuation of pol. forces

③ New Deal left many problems unresolved; created new problems

- failed to end depression before 1940s
- absence of structural, industrial reform
- limits of new welfare state
- failure to help groups most in need of assistance
- modest record on racial issues
- New Deal did not do more because of insufficient state capacity
- absence of govt. institutions to supervise industrial economy
- strength of private organisations

① cyclical (134)

- predictability, order
- shift bet. public reform & private interests.

② organizational Smithies (135)

- important changes from small → big organizations
- cf. military industrial complex, CW period.

③ consensus scholarship. (136)

- negativity/limits of policies in the period.
- decline of genuine democracy, individual influence on government reduced, losing say in affairs of country.
- cf. large organizations in place

④ failure to nationalize/unite (137)

- preservation of individual liberties preventing Americans from defining themselves as a nation.
- eg. different interest groups

⑤ call for golden/traditional past and attack on symbolic scapegoats (138)

- may arise from problematic issues in current age; looking back to past for causes/answers.

⑥ localistic, decentralized institutions.

- changes arising from religion/social/cultural changes, not just political

⑦ non-political forces, mass consumerism (141)

- changes from bottom up.
- power of the electorate.

⑧ - anti-cyclical (141)

- progressive impulses/continuity.

- unchanged narrative of New Deal (143)

- Period of reform and good.

- New Deal Revisionists (144)

- looking at intimate mechanisms of the New Deal, constraints, FDR not omnipotent (had to cater to opposition views)

- element of luck in events

- uncertainty.