

## CONFLICTING HISTORICAL VIEWPOINTS: NO. 13

### *How New Was the New Deal?*

To many conservative observers, the New Deal was a destructive experiment in socialism. Al Smith angrily denounced the "Brain-Trusters" as Marxists in Jeffersonian clothing, and Herbert Hoover shuddered when he contemplated the horrors of "New Deal collectivism." Yet, with the exception of Edgar Robinson — whose deprecatory *The Roosevelt Leadership* (1955) is read largely for its novelty — this contemporary judgment has found no support among historians. Whatever else it was, scholars generally agreed, the New Deal was not socialism. Richard Hofstadter (*Age of Reform*, 1955) called it the "New Departure" and Carl Degler (*Out of Our Past*, 1959) termed it the "Third American Revolution." They both agreed that the New Deal departed in fundamental ways from the American reform tradition, but neither viewed it as particularly radical or dangerous. The New Deal was something of a break with the past, these liberal scholars argued, but it was also an essentially constructive and healthy response to the challenge of the Great Depression.

The argument for benign discontinuity was widely, although not universally, accepted. Many distinguished historians, including Arthur Link, Henry Steele Commager, and Eric Goldman, believed that Roosevelt's programs evolved naturally from traditional American reform impulses. In *Rendezvous*

with *Destiny* (1952), Goldman discovered the New Deal's antecedents in the ideas and policies of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and even Herbert Hoover. The roots of the New Deal, he concluded, were firmly fixed in the soil of traditional American values.

Although once heatedly debated, the revolution-evolution controversy is no longer an issue dividing the scholarly community. In recent years, historians have worried less about the origins of the New Deal and more about its effectiveness. Liberal sympathizers, most notably Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., have cast the Roosevelt administration in a most favorable light. Sharply contrasting New Deal dynamism with the static "Old Order," Schlesinger's brilliant *Age of Roosevelt* (3 vols., 1957–1960) portrayed FDR as a commonsense democrat who spurned "dogmatic absolutes" and sought a middle way between the extremes of "chaos and tyranny," *laissez-faire* and collectivism. Other liberal scholars, including James MacGregor Burns (*Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, 1956) and William E. Leuchtenburg (*Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 1963), were less laudatory. Although generally favorable, Leuchtenburg focused on the limited effects of New Deal recovery and reform measures; Burns, though not without sympathy for Roosevelt, faulted the Democratic president for failing to embrace Keynesian economics and to recast his party as the party of reform.

In the 1960s, radical scholars offered vastly more damning analyses. Such New Left scholars as Howard Zinn (ed., *New Deal Thought*, 1966) and Barton J. Bernstein (ed., *Towards a New Past*, 1967) attempted to expose the poverty of the New Deal imagination and the essential conservatism of its leadership. In their view, Roosevelt was the creature of corporate capitalism; he failed to solve the problems of the Depression, and he made no effort to create an equitable society.

Most historians of the last two decades have moved away from debating whether the New Deal was a good or bad development and toward trying to explain why it took the form it did. Scholars such as Barry Karl (*The Uneasy State*, 1985) and Alan Brinkley (*The End of Reform*, 1995) have focused on the political and ideological constraints that Roosevelt and other New Dealers faced as they fashioned the reforms of the 1930s.

### FOR FURTHER READING

President Hoover's revealing *Memoirs* (3 vols., 1951–1952) describe his own administration well and comment without admiration on the policies of his successor. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Crisis of the Old Order* (1957) provides an unflattering portrait of Republican leadership from a liberal Democratic point of view. The more sympathetic studies of Joan Hoff Wilson (*Herbert Hoover*, 1975) and David Burner (*Herbert Hoover*, 1978) reflect the revisionist consensus on the first Depression president. The 1929 debacle and the Depression are illuminated by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The Great Crash* (1972), Michael A. Bernstein in *The Great Depression*