H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel T. Rodgers. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. 672 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05131-7.

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NOTE: H-STATE (Peter Dobkin Hall), H-URBAN (Clay McShane) and H-SCI-MED-TECH (Harry M. Marks) have organized a review symposium of Daniel T. Rodgers' *Atlantic Crossings*. Rodgers' book offers a substantial reinterpretation of Euro-American social reform in the decades 1880-1940; it discusses topics of interest to a great many kinds of historians, including urban history, public health, labor and political history among others.

The symposium leads with a summary of the book by Harry M. Marks (The Johns Hopkins University), to be followed by comments (in separate messages) from Prof. Victoria de Grazia (Columbia University), David Hammack (Case Western Reserve University), Seth Koven (Villanova University), Sonya Michel (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champagne), and Pierre-Yves Saunier (CNRS, Lyon). The author's own comments can be found linked to each individual review.

Anyone who is interested in accessing the colloquium, in whole or in part, can do so in the Book Review Logs under the headings of H-Sci-Med-Tech, H-State, and H-Urban. All of the individual posts will be placed under each list's header.

Daniel Rodgers' *Atlantic Crossings* is an important book that has many virtues. By stepping back to write a history of comparable developments in social politics, rather than a series of "comparative histories," Rodgers successfully calls attention to developments common to many industrial polities that have often been obscured in accounts that overemphasize difference. By focusing on a large group of politically active idea brokers rather than on "pure" intellectuals or practical politicians, he successfully emphasizes the importance of work that defines and frames issues. For fifty years and more, Rodgers shows, prominent idea brokers and policy advocates drew close connections among government policies and other activities that have more recently seemed separate and distinct to many historians. These included public health, housing, urban planning and design, parks and recreation, workplace safety, workers' compensation, pensions, and insurance of many kinds, as well as poor relief and health care. As Rodgers points out, several of these matters were of great interest to chambers of commerce as well as to labor organizations, to commercial insurance companies as well as to social reformers. And, as a general contribution to the history of the U.S., *Atlantic Crossings* makes a very strong case for viewing the New Deal as part of a movement that dated to the 1880s, a movement in many industrializing nations to redefine the relation of the national government to economic and social affairs.

One of the notable virtues of *Atlantic Crossings* is Rodgers' observation that the progressive "social politics" of the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth was not simply about the expansion of "the state." It had, as he puts it, more to do with efforts, social as well as political, to limit the market. Some innovations required only independent, cooperative, voluntary social action. Some needed only permissive enabling legislation. Other innovations called for state subsidies of "the voluntary institutions of society" in a pattern Rodgers calls "subsidarist." (p. 28.) Here Rodgers makes the very important distinction, usually ignored by historians of social politics, between services provided directly by state employees, and services the state encourages or, through direct contracts or indirect vouchers, pays others to provide [1].

This is a theme others may well want to pursue. Rodgers does not connect subsidarist efforts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to recent activity, but the connections surely exist. State subsidies to "nongovernment organizations" have increased significantly in Europe and elsewhere in recent decades. In the United States, the share of the Gross Domestic Product that flows through the federal government and goes to pay for health care, research, education, job training, and other human services has increased from less than 0.4% in 1960 to just under 3% in 1980, then to nearly 4.5% in 1997 [2]. Perhaps two-thirds of this money flows, in a

kind of "subsidarist" fashion, to nonprofit organizations. Most commonly, federal money flows through vouchers and related instruments, increasingly the chosen instruments of federal social policy in the United States. Under recent "charitable choice" legislation, some of this money is now going to pay for services provided by organizations that are affiliated with religious groups.

Atlantic Crossings has other virtues as well, and I am sure they will receive full attention in this H-State discussion. To start discussion here, I would raise some questions about Rodgers' definition of his topic and about his treatment of the policy environment faced by Americans who sought to bring ideas about the positive uses of government into the United States.

To judge from his own index, Rodgers defines "social politics" in a way that emphasizes efforts to expand government involvement in the welfare of employed workers and farmers, and in urban development. Apart from Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, David Lloyd George, and Theodore Roosevelt, the largest number of index citations go to urban planning and housing advocates Catherine Bauer, Charles Booth, Frederick C. Howe, Lewis Mumford, and Raymond Unwin, and to social reformers William Beveridge, Richard T. Ely, Florence Kelley, Beatrice Webb, and Sidney Webb – all of whom favored increased government activity, at least through regulation and control. Close behind in index references are other social reformers concerned with city living conditions – Jane Addams, Paul U. Kellogg of *Survey* magazine, Albert Shaw, Mary Kingsbury Simkhovitch, and Edith Elmer Wood. In many ways *Survey* magazine and its sponsor, the Russell Sage Foundation, lay at the heart of "social politics" as Rodgers defines the topic.

Atlantic Crossings is an ambitious and carefully constructed book, and it is certainly true that the idea brokers on whom it focuses did concern themselves with the entire array of policy concerns that Rodgers emphasizes [3]. It would be inappropriate to criticize so coherent and effective a book for an omission of additional topics. But it is interesting that although Rodgers states that he defines "social politics" to include nongovernmental efforts to limit the market and does writes extensively about cooperatives both in agriculture and among industrial workers, he pays almost no attention to nonprofit organizations that were not set up as cooperatives, although such organizations (including a majority of U.S. hospitals and clinics, and very large shares of its colleges, museums, and social service agencies) probably expanded from 1% to 3% of the U.S. gross domestic product in the years he writes about.

It would also be interesting to know whether Rodgers ever thought about including developments in two policy fields that he generally ignores: elementary and secondary education, and health care. U.S. idea brokers and policy-makers in these fields paid as much attention to European and British Commonwealth models and innovations as did those in the fields he does emphasize, especially before World War I. Many late-nineteenth-century education leaders, for example, extolled Prussian approaches. And in these areas as in urban planning, public health, and social welfare, U.S. leaders usually found their own ways to accomplish purposes they shared with other parts of the industrial world.

I would also raise two questions about the policy environment in which Rodgers' idea brokers sought to advance their favored reforms. Rodgers focuses on connections among the idea brokers rather than on the context in which they operated. But one of the excellent qualities of *Atlantic Crossings* is his thoughtful attention to the constraints imposed on the idea brokers by the political and policy contexts in which they operated – constraints of which nearly all his protagonists were well aware.

The first question has to do with the relation between ideas and "problems" in shaping policy debates. In making his case for close attention to idea brokers, Rodgers offers a strong argument for the significance of ideas in politics. "Americans in the Progressive Era," he writes, "did not swim in problems – not more so, at any rate, than Americans who lived through the simultaneous collapse of the economy and the post-Civil War racial settlement in the 1870s. It would be more accurate to say that they swam in a sudden abundance of solutions, a vast number of them brought over through the Atlantic connection." (p. 6.) Rodgers is surely right to insist that problems do not create their own solutions, and to remind us indirectly that such "solutions" as the post-Civil War racial settlement often fail to solve the underlying problems they ostensibly address. But the usual argument has not been simply that the American Progressives faced many problems. It has been, rather, that they faced some very specific problems that grew out of the rapid urbanization of the northeastern and upper midwestern U.S., and out of that region's simultaneous industrial transformation. The idea brokers who fill Rodgers' book focused quite explicitly on these problems. Others may well want to do more than Rodgers does with the relation between pressing problems, such as, for example, the poverty of families whose breadwinner had suffered injury at work, and ideas about work accidents and the law.

The second question has to do with participants in the U.S. policy-making process. One of the great strengths of *Atlantic Crossings* is Rodgers' insistence on the variety of the forces and circumstances that shaped policy decisions. His argument that economic interests and commitment to private property rights were very important but by no means determined all outcomes is very persuasive. But I wonder whether he gives adequate attention to the importance of the family farm, the private house on its own lot, the small retail business, and even the small manufacturing firm in shaping the perceptions and preferences of American voters and elected officials.

Perhaps more important, I wonder whether he gives sufficient attention to the impact of religious diversity on social policy debates in the United States. It is striking that *Atlantic Crossings* pays more attention to Catholics in Europe than in the United States. Rodgers disagrees quite sharply with Lizabeth Cohen's argument, in *Making a New Deal*, that ethnic, often Catholic, mutual-benefit associations played important roles in the big cities of the upper midwest and northeast before the Great Depression [4]. He certainly seems right to insist that ethnic mutual-benefit insurance companies were financially weak and often poorly run. But Catholic commitment to community institutions, together with the powerful Protestant attachments of the leaders of many public institutions, explains much of the persistent American opposition to the expansion of government social and health care as well as educational services before the Great Society. Accounts of policy debates within the Democratic Party between Reconstruction and the 1970s must pay as much attention to Catholic views as to the views of Southern segregationists.

American Catholics (and to a lesser extent Lutherans, members of the various Eastern Orthodox communities, and Jews) defined (and continue to define) their communities to a great extent through their sponsorship of hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, schools and colleges, as well as through mutual benefit organizations. They devoted great effort between the 1870s and the 1930s to the defense of their right to do so. One high point of that effort was the successful mid-1920s defense before the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of PIERCE v. SOCIETY of the SISTERS, of the right of parents to send children to nonpublic schools, and of Catholic nuns and others to operate private schools [5]. It is notable that federal aid did not flow to hospitals, clinics, social service organizations, or schools until the designers of the G.I. Bill, the Hill-Burton Act, and then Great Society legislation found ways to direct federal funds to sectarian institutions.

One last observation about religion in the policy debates that make up *Atlantic Crossings*. Rodgers makes some striking observations about the role of religion in some policy debates. The Social Gospel facilitated exchanges among American, British, and northern European Protestants, he notes (p. 63ff). In the 1920s, European visitors sometimes mocked the utopian Calvinism of U.S. prohibition. Yet although he acknowledges Thomas Haskell's work [6], Rodgers has little to say about the shift in the authority of policy advocates from Protestant ministers to secular "experts" that took place at the end of the nineteenth century. Rodgers is probably correct when he suggests that Haskell exaggerated the success of the academic experts' efforts to gain authority for their ideas. But Haskell persuasively argues that northeastern Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians had lost much of their ability to define the social policy agenda by 1900. Thereafter, many of the leading social policy forums – especially in the northeastern, upper midwestern, and north Pacific coast areas that Rodgers emphasizes – were nonsectarian, secular, and "scientific" in self-conception. ATLANTIC CROSSINGS tells part of this story, but leaves more for others to develop.

NOTES

[1]. For a good discussion of the various ways in which governments can provide or evoke services, see Elinor Ostrom and Gina Davis, "Nonprofit Organizations as Alternatives and Complements in a Mixed Economy," in David C. Hammack and Dennis R. Young, editors, *Nonprofit Organizations in a Market Economy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), pp. 23-56; for the best general discussion of alternative forms of owning and controlling service-producing agencies, see Henry Hansmann, *The Ownership of Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[2]. Calculated from "Historical Tables" in the Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 1999, pp. 50-64, Budget of the U.S., FY 1999 Online via GPO Access [http://wais.access.gpo.gov].

[3]. I have discussed the Russell Sage Foundation's involvement in social welfare, industrial safety, public health, city planning, and related issues in *Social Science in the Making: Essays on the Russell Sage Foundation, 1902-1972*, with Stanton Wheeler (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994).

[4], Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[5]. For the case of PIERCE v. SOCIETY OF THE

SISTERS, see David C. Hammack, *Makeing the Nonprofit Sector in the United States: A Reader*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 404-421. A good account of Catholic responses to Protestant influence in public schools is Lloyd P. Jorgenson, *The State and the Nonpublic School, 1825-1925* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987).

[6]. Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Authority* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1977).

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