

# H-Net Reviews

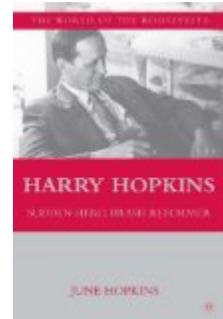
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**June Hopkins.** *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 271 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-21206-3.

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## The Missing Harry Hopkins

In histories of the depression era, Harry Hopkins appears as the quintessential New Dealer. A lanky, chain-smoking workaholic, Hopkins ran the Roosevelt Administration's key relief agencies –the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Civil Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration. He combined an unabashed willingness to use federal power to reform the welfare system with a strong distrust of a permanent federalized welfare state. He played an important role in the expansion of the federal bureaucracy but showed great disdain for the plodding culture of bureaucratic routine. He was intensely loyal to the President but his brash public persona served as a lightning rod for critics of the administration. In the early 1940s Hopkins made the transition from relief Czar to foreign policy advisor, mirroring the shift in the New Deal order itself caused by the rise of fascism and the Second World War.

We probably know as much about Hopkins as we do about any New Dealer. He has been the subject of at least four biographies and is prominently featured in most accounts of the New Deal. Is there really anything more to say about the man? Surprisingly, there is. As his granddaughter June Hopkins shows in her new biography, Hopkins' early career as a social worker and welfare administrator – and its influence on the New Deal – has been virtually ignored in previous accounts.

In the early chapters of this biography, Hopkins seems to be the embodiment of Richard Hofstadter's famous thesis about the small town origins of progressivism. He was raised in Iowa by a deeply religious

mother and a father drawn to the rhetoric of William Jennings Bryan and the populists. He attended Grinnell College at a time when it was steeped in the Christian reformism of the social gospel movement and upon graduation he emigrated to the lower east side of New York City, working in a social settlement called the Christadora House. Here, like so many reformers of the era, Hopkins was exposed to the class and cultural diversity of American urban life at the turn of the century. In New York, he married a Jewish immigrant named Ethel Gross and entered the city's social reform networks which would play such an influential role in national welfare policy during the coming decades.

Hopkins quickly emerged as an ambitious "professional altruist." In 1913 he was employed by the Association For Improving The Condition of the Poor, one of New York's premier private welfare agencies, and was chosen to head its new "Employment Bureau." During the recession of 1914 - 1915 he teamed with William E. Mathews – who would also become an influential advocate for public employment in the 1930s – to create a pioneering work relief program at the Bronx Zoo. Hopkins was also a strong supporter of "widows' pensions" -state-mandated programs for single women which were the forerunners of the modern welfare entitlement - and in 1915 was appointed Executive Secretary of the city's Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW), a public agency which administered the program.

Hopkins resigned from the BCW in 1917, but his career as an aggressive professional who wanted to be

where the action was had been launched. During the Great War he was employed by the American Red Cross (ARC), serving its Southern Division in New Orleans as assistant director of “civilian relief” (the division had a caseload of 200,000 families of servicemen) and later moved to Atlanta to become the ARC’s regional director. In 1923 Hopkins returned to New York, soon landing a job as director of the New York Tuberculosis Association. This was the position he held during the first years of the Great Depression, prior to being tabbed to run the New York State Temporary Emergency Relief Administration.

This important story takes up most of the monograph. Although the primary source material from Hopkins himself appears rather thin (we are presented with interesting accounts of Grinnell, Christadora House and mothers’ pensions in New York City but relatively little about what Hopkins had to say about them), June Hopkins presents a strong case that her grandfather’s experiences administering work relief and widows’ pensions influenced his later New Deal policies. The author also does an admirable job of placing her story in the context of the proliferating literature on the origins of the American social policy. References to the likes of Linda Gordon and Theda Skocpol are integrated into the narrative (although they are mysteriously missing from the index), as Hopkins the elder always appears to be at the cutting edge of the emerging American welfare state.

Yet the author appears to be rather hesitant to challenge other historians when her evidence seems to undermine their conclusions. In particular, the Hopkins story would seem to raise questions about Linda Gordon’s influential interpretation of gender and American welfare policy. Gordon has argued that the structure of the Social Security Act - and the welfare state it created - reflected a “gendered” division of labor between male social insurance advocates and female welfarists. Expanding on the work of Barbara Nelson and other feminist historians, Gordon argues that these two reform traditions shaped the 1935 law, creating a “two-tiered” welfare state.

But here we have Harry Hopkins, a rather typical male reformer, who administers welfare programs and advocates social insurance, work relief, and widows pensions. He appears as one of a cadre of mostly male modernizers and professionalizers who shaped the world of public and private welfare in the 1920s, laying the basis for the institutionalization of state public welfare in the New Deal years. Certainly his sensibilities seem quite different from the “maternalists” around the U.S. Chil-

dren’s Bureau who carried the female “dominion of reform” into the 1930s. But they all promoted the expansion and professionalization of private charity and public welfare in the twenties and thirties; and lobbied hard for social insurance and public employment during the New Deal years. I would argue that Hopkins’ biography challenges the notion of two distinct reform traditions (and perhaps even the more influential concept of a “two tiered” welfare system created by the Social Security Act).

The author spends less than two chapters on her grandfather’s role in depression-era relief, perhaps believing that she has little to add to what has already been said. There are brief accounts of Hopkins’ role as head of the New York State Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (1931-1933) and the New Deal’s FERA (1933-1935). The discussion of Hopkins’ administration of the WPA after 1935 is surprisingly sparse (five pages). Here, the author defers to previous biographers, particularly George McJimsey and Searle Charles. Unlike them, however, she emphasizes Hopkins’ support for a permanent public employment program and a more liberal version of the single-parent family entitlement (Aid To Dependent Children), policies which were short-circuited by congressional resistance to an expanded federal welfare role.

This last point is part of her broader argument which has Hopkins’ early career, particularly his support for work relief and widows’ pensions, influencing “the configuration of the American welfare system as it appeared in the 1930s.” (201) The cover of the book is a good deal bolder, calling Hopkins “the man who started the welfare system.”

Perhaps one should excuse the publisher for engaging in a bit of hyperbole to promote the book as relevant to the debate over the 1996 welfare reforms. But I see the evidence in the book as suggesting a very different relationship between Hopkins and the modern American welfare state. Hopkins was a liberal reformer who staunchly opposed what became the distinctive feature of the American welfare system - means-tested relief. He was, after all, the key influence behind Roosevelt’s decision to “quit this business of relief” in 1935.

When Hopkins became head of the New Deal’s FERA in the spring of 1933, there was already a full-fledged federal relief program. This was the product of something called the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932, an act which created a national relief program ignored in most histories of the era. The fact that the federal government financed most relief on the eve of

Roosevelt's inauguration would no doubt surprise most historians. It certainly came as a shock to Harry Hopkins, who told a group of social workers soon after he became FERA director, "I was the most surprised man in the world when I got to Washington and found that the federal government was paying eighty percent of all unemployment relief in the United States." Hopkins spent the next two years trying to eliminate the "dole."

The author makes a strong case that Hopkins' early career is essential to understanding his approach to depression-era relief and she successfully integrates recent work on the welfare state into her narrative. These are her key goals and she accomplishes them well. But by

portraying the policy which eventually emerged as consistent with his goals, she may unwittingly buttress one of the central myths which shape the contemporary policy debate – that welfare as we have come to know it was a failed liberal program advocated by New Deal reformers. It was not. It was a system that emerged in the absence of well-funded alternatives like comprehensive social insurance and public employment. Hopkins certainly would have preferred the latter.

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