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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Published on H-State (October, 1999)

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.

Readers of Daniel Rodger's capacious new work might want to appreciate the symmetry between its author's eclectic method and intrepid research abroad and the assorted cultural interests and arduous trans-Atlantic voyages of the book's protagonists, U.S. progressive reformers. The result of one and the other foray into foreign lands is an enlarged and enriched frame of citation, the progressives using theirs to legislate reforms on behalf of social welfare, the historian using his to analyze the legacy of that action. To stretch this analogy further, we might also note that whereas the progressive reformers drew on their experience abroad to produce a novel, if distinctly American liberal reform tradition, the author has drawn on his to produce a novel, if decidedly "made in U.S.A." interpretation of its origins.

This explanation emphasizes the supply as opposed to the demand side of social reform. It foregrounds the press of new ideas and experiments circulating through the North Atlantic world as opposed to the pressures from below

arising from social struggles, the collective awakening to notions of social risks, or the implacable drive on the part of aggressive nation-states to engage in hygienizing bio-politics; all of the latter are arguments that European historians of similar phenomena have advanced to explain the origins and character of early twentieth century social reform. Vigorous if a bit ingenuous, serendipitous and piecemeal, the U.S. reform movement, as it is characterized here, ultimately seems very distant from the projects of capitalist reform in Europe. This is notwithstanding that it drew so insistently upon them as an inspiration.

Whether or not the supply of ideas is as crucial to reformist undertakings as Rodgers makes out here, whether or not he adequately addresses the paradox of why American reform which appeared to be converging with the European then diverged from it, he does convincingly show how much contact there was among turn-of-the century critics of market society and how important this cross-Atlantic circuit was to the education of American reformers.

My own queries turn here on two issues related to this traffic in ideas and institutions: first, on characterizing the cross-national terrain over which they moved, and second, on interpreting their consumption in milieu so very distant from their original place of conception. Both issues present themselves in a similar context, though from a different vantage point when, in the wake of World War I, continental Europe began to face the challenge of American models of market culture. Sweeping over the old problematic of capitalist reform, this U.S. wave of social invention carried with it the concept of the "standard of living" engineered by access to mass consumption, and would eventually become the hegemonic current, influencing European reformism more and more from the second half of the century.

The study of institutional transfers inevitably raises what is perhaps the foremost problem comparativists address, which is why innovations appear more or less simultaneously and with common features in what might seem like different contexts, and why, over the longer term, such innovations might produce drastically different outcomes. In his famous 1928 essay on the comparative method, Marc Bloch, basing his examples on the spread of the feudal system, suggests three possibilities: namely, that commonalities across different cultures are owed to a common social-structural origin, a common source of dissemination, or a common functionality (assuming that there were only so many ways of acting in human society). For historians of the twentieth century, in which change has been so rapid, promoters (and opponents) of innovation catch on so quickly to new trends, and public debate delights in mixing up arguments about the causes of bad (and good) trends, distinguishing among these different possibilities is tricky as is giving them their appropriate weight. If you emphasize the first, you risk being denounced as a determinist, to emphasize the third a "modernizationist," or functionalist, while to emphasize the second hypothesis seems to explain nothing unless there is some plausible account of why any single source should be hegemonic.

The key move for comparativists lies in establishing the broad historical context, which Rodgers does, though only very cursorily as the North Atlantic "field of force." This space, loosely unified by the intensification of market relations, prodigious urbanization, and rising working class resentments (p. 59) was a far stormier place that he suggests. Far from being placid waters, open to traffic hither and yon, in which backwardness and lags among states were imagined as much as real, it was the eye of the hurricane of a conflictual global capitalist world-system. Across the North Atlantic the leading western states competed over models of capitalist accumulation, their rivalries passing through two catastrophic wars that shook Europe from its global leadership and

annihilated classical liberal visions of progressive reform.

If the North Atlantic is viewed as a site of rising and declining hegemonies, and we see hegemony as Robert Cox's reading of Gramsci underscores, as speaking to the role of leading states in exercising influence in the domain of social as well as technological invention, certain features of Rodger's analysis stand in sharper relief [1].

The first is periodization. World War I should be underscored as a real turning point. Before that, Europe's attractiveness is indeed very great. Afterward, the U.S. and the USSR emerged as the main poles of social invention. Before the War, Germany and Britain competed mightily for primacy in the field of reform as in other endeavors, and American reformers, as Rodgers documents, established a special relationship with German reformers at Halle, Leipzig, and other university centers and especially around the Verein fur Sozialpolitik at Berlin, the young Americans sharing with their German professors and contemporaries a common interest in neo-mercantilist political economy suited to big (and closed) national markets and a common distaste for the tired Manchesterism and imperial highhandedness of the British. After the war, German statism was indelibly associated with the Kaiser's warmongering, and German reformism tinged with the menace of bolshevism. Before the war, nationalism and liberal reformism could coexist. After the war, nationalist ideologies were incorporated into right-wing authoritarian programs and Fascist corporatism presented itself as a new "third way" toward reform, and its positions on demographic policy, maternity and child care, as well as leisure, enjoyed great influence within international reform circles, among their U.S. participants as well.

If we see the Atlantic as an arena of competing and uneven development, the relationship of national and internationalism acquires a different salience from the relatively open and progressive world Rodgers portrays. Though ideas did indeed crisscross national frontiers and were nurtured in international congresses by cosmopolitan minds, reform was essentially a nationalizing, if not nationalistic phenomenon. The passage of social reform legislation was an element of competition among national states, its implementation a factor of national redemption, its contribution to improving the human factor calculated more or less scientifically in national accounts on wages, fertility, pensions, public health, and migration. Paradoxically, the very implementation of reform on a national basis acted as an element of national cohesion, working not only against the internationalism of the labor movement but also against the cosmopolitanism of progressive ideas. Foreign examples might spur innovation. But their foreign nature, whether that was characterized as statist, authoritarian, socialistic, or other, could just as easily obstruct it.

My second point regards the institutionalization of ideas generated in such a freighted broader context. Globalization has engendered a vast literature on the "contests of interpretation" unleashed by cross-national encounters. Rodgers speaks of a "fluid politics of borrowing" (p. 249), and in his forceful conclusion of the "expanded world of social-political referents and solutions (that) made politics out of mere economic fate."(p. 508). What I miss in this vast canvas of the cross-Atlantic politics of citation is a sense of the discursive power, the fraught processes of inclusion and exclusion that are suggested in notions of "identity formation," "creolization," "dialogical encounter," or "hybridization," just to mention a few terms commonly used in such studies [2]. Not much is necessarily gained from new-fangled borrowing from anthropology, linguistics, or social psychology the old-fashioned empiricist might say. But something surely is to be said for heightened awareness that a nuanced and systematic assessment of cultural-institutional transfers is very problematic, all the more so when real issues of translation are involved.

One problem whose answer eluded me here is the degree to which experiments from Europe did actually set terms of debate and/or shape alternatives. We know from European responses to the challenge of post-war U.S. models of production that experts were in effect forced to debate whether high productivity necessarily went-hand in hand with out-of-control consumption and rationalized kitchens would necessarily engender unmanageable American-style housewives. We know that sooner or later non-anglophone Europeans, the overwhelming majority, in the process of adopting new words like "service" and "marketing" had to assimilate whole new conceptual relationships. To what degree, say, did German social reformist ideas, imbricated as they were with statism, solidaristic ideas of market, sharp class hierarchies, or social radicalism, reshape the meaning of "social"? The answer might well be that Americans relatively speedily suppressed the original frame of reference, eliminating the foreign and alien far speedier than Europeans could expurgate the American influence. The near-total erasure of the German intellectual influence not just from the public, but also from the academic collective memory is in itself stunning testimony to this capacity.

The issue of appropriation takes us back to Rodgers' description of American experimentation as eclectic, local, even innocent or at least ingenuous. This is of a piece with his overall negative view of the propensity in the U.S. to marry reform to commercial capitalism, unlike Europe, where reform was allegedly solidly wedded to social democracy (p. 408). The fact is that by the interwar period, progressive reformism was everywhere in crisis, and mass consumer-oriented capitalism presented itself as a strikingly rich vein of reform in the face of cutbacks of state provision, vast unemployment, and the pinched notions of workers' lives that prevailed in reformist circles. It is also true that in some measure all reform in the Atlantic area was piecemeal until after World War II when the Atlantic markets reopened, stabilized, and grew strongly under U.S. hegemony, and indigenous social-democratic and Catholic social-market ideas were wedded to American models of production and consumption.

Above all what I learned from Rodger's erudition is that Americans were quick learners. The cosmopolitanism of turn-of-the century reformers was an important contribution to American ascendancy. The eclecticism of their style of appropriation and the intensely local way in which reform was practiced far from making the U.S. marginal to the mainstream, contributed to the social inventiveness that would lend so much dynamism to the U.S.'s informal empire over the next three-quarters of the century.

If, to conclude, we recognize that the U.S. old strength came from making connections abroad, from going outside to acquire "a spark of philosophy," what does it say now for U.S. leadership that American elite culture is so scornful of social reform abroad? If it is not oblivious to it, the attitude today toward the giant mixing bowl of projects and measures of the European Union--around leisure, job training, gender parity, child care--is "been there, done that." Under the new world order, the level playing field is the name of the game, and the only arbiter of public policy seems to be consumer choice and opinion polling, expressed in American, please.

NOTES

[1]. Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony, and International Relations: an Essay in Method, Stephen Gill, ed., Gramsci, Historical Materialism, and International relations, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 49-66; see also Giovanni Arrighi, "The Three Hegemonies of Historical Capitalism," Review, XIII,3 (Summer, 1990) 365-408.

[2]. The fruitfulness of such concepts and approaches to analyzing the meaning of cross-cultural contact in another context is exemplified in Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. Legrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, eds, ***Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin***

American Relations (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998). One might usefully ask here why methodologies appropriate for the study of the contacts between "white" and "dark" areas (British Empire-Indian subcontinent, U.S.-Latin America, Europe-Africa, Europe-the Caribbean) have not been regarded as appropriate to the contacts within the "White" Atlantic?

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://www.h-net.org/~state

Citation: Victoria de Grazia. Review of Rodgers, Daniel T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age.* H-State, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

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