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Martin J. Sklar. *Creating the American Century: The Ideas and Legacies of America's Twentieth-Century Foreign Policy Founders.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 270 pp. $29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-108-40924-7.

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It is perhaps not customary to include an extensive quote from the author in a review of a book, but Martin J. Sklar's work, as anyone who knows it, is not easy to either analyze or summarize. This quote captures, I think, the primary thesis of the book under review. This is Sklar on the Open Door Policy (ODP) as it has, in his estimation, played out over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and exemplifies why he thinks it is a policy that, if we are wise, should be pursued into the future. "In little more than a century, since the 1890s, the world passed from various empires, nations, cultures, and societies interacting in belligerence or amity, to various nations, cultures, and societies intensively interacting, intermixing, and moving toward a universal-human civilization, consisting of variations and variables: one might say, allegorically, from 'Clash of Civilizations' and rivalry of closed empires, since ancient times, to the modern-society, 'Open Door' world, or globalism, of the 'American Century'" (p. 211).

As the quote indicates, Sklar believes deeply in the efficacy of the ODP developed in the wake of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the US war of conquest against the Filipino people (1898-1902) in the two Open Door Notes of 1899 and 1900. Sklar believes that the ODP was (and is) a developmental and progressive policy designed to move the world, as he says in a striking comment that deserves repeating, "toward a universal-human civilization." Sklar never says what he means by such a civilization (at least that I have been able to determine). However, the parallels to Marxist utopianism cannot be, if one knows Sklar's writing, accidental, revealing that Sklar was, to the end (Sklar died in April 2014), a conflicted Marxian, although never really a Marxist himself.[1]

Creating the American Century is divided into two sections. The intent of the first section, the part that will be of most interest to foreign relations scholars, is rather straightforward. It is to determine the extent to which "US leaders' thinking around the twentieth century's beginning anticipated, generated, and shaped ... the course of world affairs during the century, and as they are trending into the twenty first." This is Sklar's main point. If US foreign policymakers did that kind of thinking, and, unsurprisingly, he argues they did "to an impressively large extent," then we can learn from them. Furthermore, he insists that these policymakers' thinking was "consistent, effective, broad-minded, and sophisticated, in outlook, principles, objectives, and achievement" on a global scale "perhaps unprecedented" in history

(p. 130). It was not, as is often argued of US foreign policy and its movers and shakers, "vainglo-riously moralistic, naively idealistic, venally interest-centered, or parochially illusionary" (p. xviii). In other words, its practitioners planned the "American Century" with forethought, purpose, and resolve. Historians err, therefore, when they categorize US foreign policymaking in the twentieth century, as they are wont to do, in such terms as realism versus Wilsonianism, isolationism versus internationalism, liberalism versus conservatism, hard power versus soft power, neo-conservatives versus realists, and so on. All of these ideas, he contends, were "subordinate and ephemeral variables of an evolving social-institutional milieu forming and imposing an 'institutional memory,' embedded in 'core principles,' and working in a concrete historical context" (p. xviii). The "American Century," which Sklar dates from the ODP instead of Henry Luce's 1941 date, did not happen in a fit of absentmindedness. It was, he says, "proactive" not "reactive" (p. 129). This is crucial to his argument, for we can only learn from policymakers of foreign policy of the early twentieth century if they acted with drive and determination, and, most importantly, if they were successful.

The bulk of the book is spent analyzing how successfully US leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century succeeded in the task of constructing an Open Door world. And with that question extant, Sklar proceeds to trace the history of US foreign policy over the course of the remainder of the twentieth century. He does so in broad strokes yet with a depth of analysis that is both characteristic of him and worthy of examination by scholars. He also does so in an odd, but characteristically Sklar, fashion. The first two chapters are narrative in form. Chapter 1 discusses the birth of the ODP, focusing mostly on Charles A. Conant and the Philippine gold-exchange currency reform of 1903-5, which, Sklar emphasizes, probably more than other scholars have, was key to the creation of the ODP (it "provided a learning laboratory for US policy planners in designing a currency reform model, and in modifying and fine-tuning it in the light of actual experience" [p. 37]). In typical Sklar fashion, the footnotes for this chapter run twenty-five pages while the actual essay is thirty-three pages. Chapter 2 examines the 1901 proceedings of the fourteenth annual meeting of the American Economic Association (AEA), which was meeting simultaneously with the American Historical Association. In particular, he analyzes in great depth (another Sklar characteristic) the paper delivered by Brook Adams and the comments of the discussants Conant and Henry P. Willis. However, the next seven chapters consist of a series of numbered points, literally. These points serve as "propositional statements" that do not, according to Sklar, represent his own thinking but that of the "twentieth-century foreign-policy founders" (p. 109). They are meant to be succinct summations of their thinking about the world not his own. He then proceeds to set out, in those numbered points, a world history (based on Adams's paper at the AEA) that situates the United States as the heir of "great empires,... moving geographically,... and in line with comparative economic advantage, from east to west" (p. 109).

For the leaders of early twentieth-century US foreign policy, the United States was not exceptional but merely a part of the evolutionary development of ever-progressive human societies moving through time from the first civilizations to an unknown but perhaps predictable or manageable future. US leaders believed that the seat of empire had fallen into their laps, in essence fortuitously (he is not clear on this point), and the question was what would they do with it. The creation of the ODP was their answer and, in Sklar's estimation, it was brilliant, in fact, almost, but not quite, exceptional. Promoting open-system capitalism, it countered and then proved wanting all other avenues of human development offered up in the twentieth century, what he calls "closed-empire system[s]" (Nazi Germany, Hideki Tojo's Japan, Soviet Russia, Mao Zedong's China). This is because

the ODP was meant to create, and succeeded in creating, a progressive, uplifting, improving world for the vast majority of the world's people (accomplishing through capitalism, or the "capitalist-socialist mix," one of Sklar's theories about US capitalist historical development, what Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin thought could only happen through the destruction of capitalism).

One of Sklar's most important insights as a scholar, highlighted in this book, is his situating of the United States as a "developing country" in the context of world history, backed up in this book by the words of early US foreign policymakers. The United States, he contends, is not exceptional or sacred or foreordained, but just another nation among nations in the general trend of humanity marching forward in an evolutionary process that is never ending. The United States has been for the last roughly one hundred years, and is still, the dominant power carrying the torch of progress forward, and in that it may be exceptional *in its time*, but it is not, according to Sklar, exceptional in and of itself. This is a powerful counternarrative to American exceptionalism that, if explored intellectually, has the potential to allow one to see the United States in a different light, as just one railcar of a long train of such cars stretching back to the dawn of time and moving forward into the unknown, as a constantly developing or evolving nation, just as Britain was (and is) a developing nation or Uganda was (and is) a developing nation and China was (and is) a developing nation and so on. In other words, the United States and its inhabitants have not escaped history! Nor have they reached the "end of history," a conception briefly popularized when the Cold War came to its startlingly calm but nonetheless dramatic end until 9/11 and the Iraq War destroyed such premature celebrations. This book reemphasizes this Sklarian idea in arguably its most lucid form (the paragraph-long sentences are kept to a minimum), which alone makes the book an important contribution to the study of US foreign relations and of world history more generally in the twentieth century.

Sklar readily admits that his theory of the United States as a developing country is consistent with modernization theory. In fact, Sklar celebrates modernization theory, because, for him, it identifies the inevitable, evolutionary path of development toward that, and here he adds a word, "universal-human cumulative civilization" (p. 142). No doubt Sklar deserves criticism for such comments as that "the Anglo-American, or 'Anglo-Saxon,' was (is) the most advanced ... race" in the last two or three hundred years of human history, and that, therefore, imperialism was a developmental process as well as a "moral obligation" (p. 114). Sklar offers no apology for this celebratory attitude. He simply believes that the historical evidence backs him entirely—the point of those numbered postulates that make up most of the book. Yet Sklar is no unabashed champion of capitalism. This is where readers on the right may get him wrong (the back of the book has a blurb from conservative scholar John Yoo), though those on the left may not fair much better. Sklar sees socialism where few on the right or the left or the vast middle do. And it is here that the influence of Marx is perhaps most apparent, although, again, in Sklar's conflicted way. "Industrializing capitalism ... especially as it moved into a corporate stage of reorganization and development," writes Sklar, "brought with it modern socialism, not as ideally, romantically, dyspeptically, or schematically conceived by either procapitalism or prosocialism partisans, doctrinaires, or utopians, but in everyday market, civic, and governmental affairs, and in activity and outlook across class lines" (p. 202). A key starting point to even begin understanding Sklar's argument lies here, in his insistence that the transformation to the corporate form of capitalism was a cross-class construction that was socialist as much as it was capitalist. Here is another example: "By the early twentieth century, industrializing capitalism and its techno-economic revolutions ... brought along vast socializations of

market and production organizations and relations: think of factories, railroads, steamship lines, telegraph and telephone, central power plants, department stores, catalogue retailing, corporations, insurance companies, commodity and capital (securities) exchanges, trade unions, cooperatives, trade associations (business), trade councils (union-labor)" (p. 201). Department stores and catalogue retailing, not to mention insurance companies and securities exchanges, as socialism? It is as though "every cop is a criminal, and all the sinners saints," as the Rolling Stones sang in ***Sympathy for the Devil***, or like flipping William Appleman Williams (whom Sklar influenced as a young scholar at the University of Wisconsin and was subsequently influenced by) on his head. This is the "capitalist-socialist mixed economy" that Sklar insists was the result of "the corporate reconstruction of American capitalism," the title of his only book-length project published in 1988. It was not "the fall of the house of labor" or "the triumph of conservatism" or "the end of reform," as various historians have characterized it in their effort to show that the transformation was a catastrophic failure for the working class, even the end of it.[2] It might have been the end of it, Sklar argues, but it was also the birth of something new and better: consumer capitalism (my phrase, not Sklar's), which is both capitalist and socialist even if we do not realize it. Taking associationalism to the extreme, perhaps, it is something neither the Left nor the Right, predisposed as they both are to see conflict rather than consensus between capital and labor—on the right, labor unions impeding on private business, on the left, the eclipse of labor by capitalist manipulators—will find much on which to agree with Sklar. Sklar even goes so far as to argue—against critics of modernization theory who maintain that, at its core, modernization theory is a nothing more than an updated version of the "White Man's Burden"—that "open-system capitalism" is, among other usually thought to be leftist positions, anti-racist, post-imperialist, and anti-sexist. In short, it is progressive and, to prove his point, he pits it against Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia, and Islamic imperialism (Isis, Al Qaeda, the Taliban). It is challenging stuff, if one cares to challenge cherished assumptions for the time required to understand it.

Sklar offers many other contrarian views in these pages. The US has become a hegemon that did not pursue hegemony. Internationalism has meant not the demise of the nation-state but the strengthening of it. A Communist-led China was acceptable to the United States, even welcomed, because it kept China from being partitioned (the old fear that led to the ODP in the first instance) and even led to its modernization. During the Cold War, the Communist states "needed the 'West' ... for restructuring, innovation, and continued development" (p. 145). President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger have not been given the credit they are due for ending the Cold War, especially from the Right, where President Ronald Reagan is given most of the credit and Nixon and Kissinger are condemned as practitioners of détente. President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and others are responsible for maintaining and sustaining peace rather than destroying it. There are many more besides. He cuts against the grain for sure, but he cannot (should not) be easily dismissed. Unfortunately, if the past is any indicator, he will be ignored. I hope this review might contribute to scholars taking Sklar seriously, beginning with this book, or at least its first section. It is a worthwhile endeavor.

The second section of the book has no real connection to the first that I could detect. It picks up another favorite topic of Sklar's: US historiography. In it he excoriates US historians for politicizing history "to serve and vindicate, or disserve and refute, past or current morals, politics, movements, interests, ideals, or selected ideological trends ... instead of [practicing] history as a disinterested discipline" (p. 176). Here, Sklar really

goes contrarian. Writing about professional historians' categorization of the historical Left and the historical Right, both among themselves and in identifying their historical subjects, he states: "The Left, are actually, in their substantive views, historically of the right" and "the Right (e.g., 'conservatives,' 'noeconservatives,' 'libertarians,' 'free-marketers,' 'evangelicals'), are actually, in their substantive views, historically of the left" (pp. 195, 197). I will leave it for those who want to venture into the book to figure out that one. If you like historiography, and I do, it is deep stuff. I am still working my way through it.

All in all, Sklar's likely last book is an important contribution to the discussion about the US and the world today. Throughout his life, Sklar apparently was a troubled and, there can be no doubt here, a vastly underappreciated scholar (see James Livingston's obituary in the *Nation*, October 15, 2014, for a powerful review of the man's work and his life).[3] Although I remain skeptical about Sklar's unabashed celebration of modernization theory, his arguments, contrarian as they can be, are often compelling. In fact, it is hard for me not to believe that if I am not getting him, I am missing out.

Note

[1]. See Martin J. Sklar, ***The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Although there is bound to be disagreement here, in this work, among others, Sklar gives us Marx as he might have seen things at the end of the twentieth century had he lived that long. See also Martin J. Sklar, ***The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U.S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. chaps. 1, 5, and 7.

[2]. David Montgomery, ***The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Gabriel Kolko, ***The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916*** (New York: Free Press, 1968; and Alan Brinkley, ***The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*** (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[3]. James Livingston, "Vanishing Act," ***The Nation***, October 15, 2014, https://www.thenation.com/article/vanishing-act/.

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