

evidence and lucid arguments make them compelling for his picture of a national Klan. Whether you agree or not, you need to read it.

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*Journal of American Studies*, 44 (2010), 2. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000824

William H. Thomas Jr., *Unsafe for Democracy: World War I and the U.S. Justice Department's Covert Campaign to Suppress Dissent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, £31.50). Pp. xi + 251. ISBN 978 0 299 22890 3.

Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, £22.95). Pp. ix + 380. ISBN 978 0 674 02792 3.

The two books under review bring new perspectives to a problem that has long troubled historians of civil liberties – the way in which the United States government, in its first venture onto the world stage, trampled democracy at home. William Thomas's *Unsafe for Democracy* relies on painstaking research into the investigative reports of detectives in the employ of the Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigation (BI – the FBI's precursor). Findings summarized in a learned appendix indicate that these detectives were mainly middle-class in background. Thomas argues that progressives were enamoured of federal government action. For its enactment they placed their faith in bourgeois experts, and BI agents fell into that category. Stating that previous historians have concentrated exclusively on the overt prosecutions of anti-war protestors under wartime sedition laws, he stakes a claim to have struck a new narrative and interpretive lode, the "covert" ideology-enforcement activities of the BI's investigators. In a further and provocative correction to previous scholarship, he balances his viewpoint by suggesting that while progressive politicians and the BI may have benefited from the support of anti-"slacker" vigilantes, their preference for federal action meant that they actually disapproved of such private groups.

In an evidence-rich case study of Wisconsin that forms the core of his book, Thomas confirms the Justice Department's judgement that the Beaver State was a hotbed of resistance to American entry into World War I. Balloted in April 1917 on the issue, seventeen citizens of Sheboygan favoured US participation, but 4,112 opposed the war. The state's large German American population was against the war if also against the Kaiser (in spite of his Welsh surname and his account of Madisonian Richard Lloyd Jones's anti-war journalism, Thomas attempts an analysis neither of Wisconsin's significant Welsh American population, nor of other non-German ethnic groups). Milwaukee's socialists and a solid sprinkling of pastors also spoke up. BI agents recruited a host of informers and on the basis of tip-offs made "cautionary visits" to the homes of potential dissenters. Built on an examination of thirty-one such visits, Thomas's account yields a picture of an insidiously spread culture of involuntary patriotism based on fear.

With that fear at its height, the nation's greatest socialist leader, Eugene Debs, was charged with sedition and in June 1918 sentenced to ten years in Atlanta's federal penitentiary. *Democracy's Prisoner* is Ernest Freeberg's engrossing account of how

Debs opposed the war, how he ran foul of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer (the “Fighting Quaker”), and how democrats then fought for his freedom. Debs played his part in the campaign for the release of all political prisoners by running for President from prison. Freeberg chronicles the fight that took place outside the prison walls for Convict 9653’s release, and the roles played in that fight by radicals like Lucy Robins.

Freeberg argues that, thanks to the efforts of his supporters when he was in prison, Debs’s anti-war stand had “unintended consequences.” One of them was the formation of the American Civil Liberties Union (1920). Another was Attorney General Harlan Fiske Stone’s directive, in 1924, that the BI should undertake no more political work. This book is a convincing exposition of a fresh theme in the history of American liberty.

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*Journal of American Studies*, 44 (2010), 2. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000836

Susan Currell, *American Culture in the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, £17.99). Pp. xix + 252. ISBN 978 0 7486 2522 2.

I have never understood exactly why the 1920s are referred to as “roaring.” Susan Currell’s explanation is intriguing: “Without a doubt, the cacophony of sound heard from millions of loudspeakers that had simply not been there just a decade earlier fixed the word ‘roaring’ permanently to ‘the twenties’” (134). This observation concludes her excellent chapter on “Film and Radio,” in which she points out that the arrival of sound on film coincided with the introduction of radio into the home. She connects these innovations with broader developments in commerce, education, politics and art. Indeed, one of the particular strengths of this book is its method of establishing connections across different areas of cultural production, avoiding easy generalizations and offering concrete examples to illustrate larger trends. (This is clearly one of the central purposes of the Twentieth-Century American Culture series, which presents the century decade by decade.)

Comparisons across different media are facilitated by the structure of the book: the chapters are: “The Intellectual Context,” “Fiction, Poetry and Drama,” “Music and Performance,” “Film and Radio,” “Visual Art and Design” and “Consumption and Leisure,” while the Conclusion focusses on the cultural legacy of the 1920s. This well-judged arrangement permits, for instance, an illuminating discussion of the relationship between photography and architecture, which grows out of an account of the New York skyscraper. The comments on the skyscraper, in turn, form part of a thematic focus on the city, which cuts across chapters. Other such themes include race, technological innovation, artistic experimentation and religion. The discussion of race issues and black writing is especially insightful; on the other hand, I found the use of the word “modernism” a little confused, and the survey of the debates over high and low culture rather vague (there is no mention of the rise of middlebrow culture and little attention to the decade’s emphasis on self-improvement). The chapter on music and performance provides an impressive and engaging