

# The New Deal and U.S. Democracy

## A Discussion of *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* By Ira Katznelson

*Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. By Ira Katznelson. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. 720p. \$29.95.

Ira Katznelson's *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* is a big book, and it addresses a big theme: the historical significance of the New Deal, as a watershed moment in U.S. political history, as a form of "social democracy, American style" that allowed liberal democracy to prevail in competition with Soviet communism and fascism, and as the "origin" of key features of contemporary politics in the United States. The book is a contribution to the study of U.S. politics, but also to the study of comparative politics, international relations, political theory, and comparative history. We have thus invited a range of political science scholars to comment on the book as a work of general political science; as an account of the New Deal and its political legacies in the United States; as a contribution to the comparative analysis of social democracy and the welfare state; and as a way of integrating the study of domestic and foreign policy, and in particular the study of U.S. politics and international relations.

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The 1930s and 1940s were a time of extraordinary upheaval, during which the world was transformed by economic depression, political turmoil, and global war. Accounting for the causes and consequences of the era's events has been one of the central concerns of scholars in the field of comparative politics (Theda Skocpol and Margaret Weir, Peter Gourevitch, Ronald Rogowski, Peter Hall). Americanists have also frequently grappled with the challenge. Ira Katznelson's *Fear Itself* is the latest addition to the literature on the subject, and adds greatly to our understanding not only of American politics but also of modern political development more generally, illuminating the conditions under which social democracy can emerge and flourish.

The fear in Katznelson's title is crucial—it turns out to be the driver of political innovation and evolution. The Great Depression tore apart Western societies, making it impossible to continue business as usual and generating a demand for activist government to stanch the bleeding. In Europe, the haplessness of democratic governments in responding to the crisis contributed to their collapse—and the seeming ability of dictatorships (whether on the

left or right) to handle national trauma more effectively facilitated their rise. Moreover, as the author notes, these regimes "claimed to be the vanguards that could discern directions to history" (p. 106) while their democratic opponents appeared uncertain and overwhelmed. The result was that by the mid-1930s, even many democrats feared that history's tide had turned against them.

This was true, Katznelson reminds us, of the United States as well. Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932 was accompanied by widespread discussion of the possible necessity of emergency rule or "constitutional dictatorship" (pp. 117 ff) to deal with the country's crisis, and America actually had a variety of the sociological and political characteristics often seen as preconditions of fascism: large masses of disaffected lower and lower middle-class voters; widespread support for populist, extremist, and racist movements; and a surprising number of intellectuals and political leaders singing the praises of authoritarianism. And as the decade progressed, fear of the crisis was matched by fear that other types of regimes were handling it better. Katznelson notes of FDR's second inaugural in 1937, "Confronted by seemingly more successful dictatorships on the Right and the Left, the president . . . was about to lead a democracy that was unsure of its practical abilities and moral authority. . . . When he spoke, capitalism had collapsed, spreading misery everywhere. Liberal parliamentary regimes were toppling. Dictatorships led by iron men and motivated by unforgiving ideological zeal seemed to have seized the future" (p. 98).

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Yet in the end, not only did democracy survive in the United States, but it also took on new life and new dimensions, undergoing the most radical and progressive period of reform in the country's history. How did this happen?

For the answer, Katznelson directs readers' attention not to the president but to Congress, and more particularly its most "persistently effective" (p. 25) and economically progressive faction—southern Democrats. Although it may be hard to imagine today, back then the poverty and backwardness of the South made its politicians natural progressives: They supported intervention in the market, the expansion of social policy, and the rights of workers and unions. And those politicians were central to Roosevelt's program and its passage.

The policies that the South supported, Katznelson stresses, underpinned a truly social democratic New Deal, refashioning the American state (p. 400) by expanding its size and scope and explicitly tasking it with "restructuring market capitalism" (p. 231) and pursuing the "public interest" (p. 233) or "common good" (p. 477). And in the United States as elsewhere, such active responses to the crisis proved very popular, particularly as time went on; the economy improved, and the party in power could take some credit for turning things around. The success of the New Deal proved that democracies could indeed "govern effectively in the face of great danger" (p. 6).

Because FDR had to rely on southern votes to pass the New Deal, however, the rescue of American democracy came at a heavy price—the need to leave in place the country's greatest shame, the South's racist system of white supremacy. The emergence of social democracy for white Americans, in other words, was predicated on the exclusion of African Americans from democracy itself. (Katznelson compares this heartbreaking domestic tradeoff with FDR's heartbreaking international ones, such as the alliance with Stalin to defeat Hitler, and the analogy seems apt.)

As time passed, however, the compromise became increasingly difficult to sustain. U.S. involvement in World War II highlighted the contradiction between racism in the South and the fight against fascism and National Socialism, and southerners came to see the growth of the federal state as a threat to the South's peculiar institutions. "Facing an emerging set of challenges to their racial order," Katznelson notes, "southern Democrats became increasingly reluctant to empower efforts . . . that enhanced national . . . power and reduced regional autonomy" (p. 233). So they stopped cooperating with Roosevelt's program. Without the South's support, "policies to guide capitalism or advance union interests" were no longer possible (p. 399), and the chance to embed social democracy permanently in the United States was lost.

Zooming out to look at the U.S. case in comparative perspective, we can see that although the New Deal was impressive, it was not unusual. Other countries also

acquired extensive welfare states during this era, and there, too, a high degree of social solidarity and shared national purpose was necessary to generate support of active government and generous social policies. In fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany—where the role of the state and the expansion of social policy was even greater than in the United States—the solidarity and shared sense of purpose was summoned through explicit nationalist and racist appeals. But even in democratic Sweden, the transition to social democracy was facilitated by social homogeneity and the conscious promotion of communitarianism. The Swedish social democrats' concept of Sweden as the *folkhemmet*, or "people's home," was stolen from the nationalist right and designed to pull in voters who wanted not just jobs but a government committed to protecting and nurturing national values and identity.

*Fear Itself* thus not only documents the price the United States paid for the New Deal, but also illuminates the tragic compromises that often lie at the heart of democratic politics. Postwar Europe lacked the violent racism that characterized the American South. But its much-praised social democratic model was supported by a distinctive sense of communal kinship and fellow feeling—one that is increasingly difficult to maintain as European societies have become increasingly diverse in recent decades. The challenge of generating support for social democracy amid social diversity is not just the story of New Deal America; it is also, in a lesser key, the story of contemporary Europe.