

REVIEW

Daniel T. Rodgers. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. 672 pp., 33 halftones, 1 table; ISBN: 0-674-05131-9; \$35.00 (£21.95) cloth.

Americans are so imbued with the sense of living in a 'city upon a hill' which is a model to the world that a book depicting American leaders enmeshed in a North Atlantic web jars. Daniel Rodgers places such a network at the heart of Progressive social reform, informing and shaping policy agendas from the 1890s to the New Deal. Starting the reader at the Eiffel Tower during the 1900 Paris exposition, Rodgers painstakingly traces the international cross-fertilization of Progressive ideas among North Atlantic nations with occasional glances toward Italy, Austria, New Zealand, and Australia. Americans from the late 1800s to World War Two were unusually willing to look abroad for social models. Earlier Americans' certainty of the superiority of their democratic institutions and their need to use Europe as a negative backdrop against which to define themselves limited borrowings. After World War Two Americans saw themselves as a model for a devastated Europe reduced to a Cold War battleground.

The economic convergence of the leading powers in the late nineteenth century made trans-Atlantic cross-fertilization possible. With industrialization came growing similarity from the American Midwest to the Ruhr Valley; accompanied by similar social problems. Urban chaos, uprooted peasants, stark class differences, and family insecurity were recognizably similar. In response a new social politics, a third way between unrestrained industrial capitalism and socialism took shape, and was a force to be reckoned with by the 1890s. Whereas many reformers previously focused on restricting government power, the new generation saw government as the only institution able to ameliorate industrialization's social damage. The resulting thought went under various banners including social democracy, *sozialpolitik*, *la reforme sociale*, Fabianism, and progressivism.

Whereas America had been the laboratory for political democracy, the models of social democracy lay elsewhere. Rodgers traces the intellectual origins of American Progressive thought to German universities, where German scholars attacked laissez-faire 'Manchester economics' and organized the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* to press government officials to intervene in the supposedly natural markets. Young American scholars who flocked to Germany, returned to create a profession of economics, imbued with German ideas. Twenty of the first twenty-six American Economic Association presidents had studied in Germany. But while they transformed the academic face of economics, their attempts to replicate the political influence of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* soon generated potentially career-ending opposition. Most backed off. But Henry C. Adams' concept of the 'natural monopoly' provided a viable halfway house between German statism and American laissez-faire. And if the German professors' direct entrée to state power could not be duplicated, the role of policy expert, institutionalized in the American Academy of Political and Social Science, became an acceptable adaptation. Expertise proved more effective than exhortation. Although the 'hidden hand' of seemingly natural markets still dominated American thought and law, the new economists partially naturalized the ideas that natural monopolies must be regulated and that public intervention could legitimately ameliorate some social ills.

The North Atlantic Progressive experiment focused on the cities, seen as the key to a democratic and decent nation-state. The story of urban progressivism (or 'municipal socialism') has been often told, but Rodgers traces surprising international influences. Progressives fighting for public control of transit systems and utilities were very conscious of the parallel efforts in Europe. 'Municipalization was the first important Atlantic-wide progressive project' (159). It was a limited success: public ownership was only uniformly accepted for water. American urban planners exhibited similar cosmopolitan traits, drawing heavily on European ideas. Zoning transferred well, but importation of stronger forms of planning was usually thwarted by constitutional barriers.

Increasingly the baton of urban social reform was passed to social workers concerned with daily issues such as housing, unemployment insurance, and workmen's compensation. Bismarck had stolen the march to establish the first social insurance; Britain's 'new liberals' added old age pensions, minimum wage, school meals, and progressive taxation. Soon, growing numbers of Americans including Theodore Roosevelt felt that the United States lagged. The sense of crisis yielded results. New York State passed the first American Workmen's Compensation bill in 1910; twenty-one other states followed within three years. Mothers' pensions, child labor laws, and other legislation regulating labor also passed before the reform enthusiasm waned. The coming of World War One ended the flurry of Progressive legislation but wartime mobilization appeared to fulfill the Progressive dream of a more collective, expert-driven society. Instead the unpopularity of 'war socialism' compounded by the 'Red Scare' buried Progressive reforms and discredited foreign models.

While social politics initially concentrated on industrial and urban problems, reviving the dying countryside pre-occupied another trans-Atlantic network. Atomistic individualism was identified as the problem and cooperation, if not collectivism, as the solution. The Danish rural revival, based on producer cooperatives and enriched by the folk schools, was the most admired model. In the 1920s the producer cooperatives flourished in the US heartland, though the spirit was more state-subsidized capitalism than communitarian socialism. However the anticapitalist side of the Danish model survived to provide New Dealers with a ready-made agenda of policies forged in a trans-Atlantic furnace. They saw the rural devastation of the Depression as an opportunity to create a more cooperative rural society. The Resettlement Administration was the vehicle, but after a few years its model communities encountered growing opposition. Soon Congress transformed the Resettlement Administration into the tamer Farm Security Administration.

Housing was also a focus of suburban and urban New Deal policy, shaped especially by Austrian, British, and Weimar examples. Model towns like Greenbelt, Maryland briefly offered the hope of providing new working and middle class housing and community. The chance for a comprehensive approach came with the Wagner Housing Act of 1937. But private housing interests successfully denuded the bill of any provisions beyond providing housing of last resort for the poorest Americans, and prohibited unions and cooperatives from receiving public funds. After a few hopeful experiments, public housing would be linked inextricably to social pathology. In the countryside and city, European models had guided New Dealers, but rarely to success.

The New Deal's great leap of comprehensive social insurance, embodied in the Social

Security Act of 1935, was based on precedents taken from Bismarck, Lloyd George, and European social democracy. Political opposition pared away medical insurance and some of the benefits for the most vulnerable workers. What survived was based on the repository of ideas developed during decades of trans-Atlantic discussions that were readily available when crisis provided the political opportunity.

For Rodgers, the American response to Britain's wartime Beveridge Report marks the end of 'the Americans' Atlantic social-political era' (485). The report's publication in 1942 initially excited Americans and FDR briefly talked of an American version. But its emphasis on minimal levels coupled with Britain's economic decline soon soured the reception. While Beveridge sounded hopeful to Britons, he seemed dour to growth-minded Americans. Basking in economic superiority and viewing Europe as a basket-case to be saved from Soviet blandishments, post-war Americans saw themselves as the model. Whereas New Dealers had extolled foreign models to sell their programs, Truman's Fair Dealers hid their European debts. As Rodgers points out, for Americans after World War Two, 'having saved the world, it would not thereafter be easy to imagine that there was still much to learn from it' (508). American exceptionalism has since dominated the rhetoric, and usually the reality, of modern social reform.

The author's stance shifts halfway through. The title suggests comparative history and the book's opening transports us to the 1900 Paris Exposition. Through the first half of the book, Rodgers takes the reader on a cosmopolitan journey criss-crossing the Atlantic. Later Rodgers increasingly depicts the vantage point of Americans looking outward for inspiration; foreign ideas become just that. The book might have come full circle from its opening scene by examining the 1939 New York World's Fair. And a discussion of trans-Atlantic Progressive linkages would have been more complete if it discussed the impact of émigrés fleeing Fascism; many participants in the network unexpectedly became American residents.

These quibbles aside, this is an impressive and informative work that will sensitize any reader to the international influences in the Progressive tradition. In particular, Rodgers deftly depicts the misunderstandings and dangers inherent in adopting social policies outside of their cultural context. Rodgers offers a model of sensitivity to how seemingly similar ideas change meaning as they cross borders. Despite the book's many felicitous turns of phrase, interesting examples, and useful insights; its length will deter readers not deeply interested in the international aspects of Progressive social thought. But those interested in the Progressive tradition or in the formation of specific American social policies will be well rewarded by sampling relevant sections. Most impressive are those on the early economists' encounter with Germany, *fin de siècle* municipalization and urban planning, social insurance before World War One, and housing policies and rural cooperatives between the wars. James Kloppenberg's *Uncertain Victory* provides an excellent complement, describing the broader intellectual connections of North Atlantic social democracy and progressivism, while Rodgers details the social policies born under that umbrella.

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Rodgers raises the broader questions about the role of foreign models in modern America. The thought of a politically astute incumbent President seeing electoral advantage in dispatching a high-profile commission to study Swedish cooperatives, as

FDR did in 1936, seems unimaginable today. Rodgers convincingly argues that since the New Deal Americans have rarely been willing to search for wisdom beyond their shores. Briefly after Sputnik and in the face of Japanese economic success, Americans turned abroad for models. But aside from moments of crisis, foreign models have carried little clout. In the 1990s it would be political suicide for a Clinton official to claim, as FDR's housing director did, that proposed legislation was 'modeled on the most successful housing experience in the world, that of England' (477). Seemingly overwhelming evidence that Americans could gain from other societies' experience with gun control and universal medical coverage falls on deaf ears in the 1990s. Despite clichés about living in a global society, national borders remain high barriers to understanding, even for citizens of the world's superpower.