

Patel, Kiran Klaus: *The New Deal. A Global History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-69114-912-7; 456 S.

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The cover of Kiran Klaus Patel's book, „The New Deal: A Global History“, features President Franklin D. Roosevelt pointing at a large globe. What seems like a perfect image for the book actually points to its central tension. The caption betrays its origin in 1942 – four years after the New Deal's end and a year after the U.S. entry into the Second World War. The gifting of the globe to the Roosevelt is symbolic – hailing a president to demonstrate an international-mindedness judged as either deficient or heretofore politically imprudent to broadcast.

Perhaps a more fitting cover image would have been FDR without a globe. This would express more accurately Patel's challenge, namely, how to make the case for global links when, as he puts it, „Roosevelt and the New Dealers had an interest in presenting their political actions, especially the more unorthodox ones, as being deeply rooted in the tradition of American government“ (p. 120). If every history book is a detective story, we could say in the spirit of metaphorical permissiveness exhibited by Patel himself, that his unravels the mystery of the globe that didn't bark.

Patel's past work on labor corps, Europeanization, competition law, and agriculture investigated state-driven and scientifically-informed projects of rationalization without neglecting the scrum of interest group clashes, political personalities, and institutional frictions that foreclose the easy translation of ideas into reality. He is a historian of Foucault in the swamp – a skill set well designed to take on the largest-scale social engineering project in American history.

Patel's opening gambit for the book is clear. In an age where the global history of everything from sexuality to pizza sees print, one could safely assume that a tale of the global hides in an event so large and multifaceted as the New Deal. The methodological move is also close at hand, and requires „only“ the prodigal knowledge and skills of a researcher

like Patel to draw back the lens and narrate everything that is happening in the world adjacent, overlapping and entangled with the events in the United States.

Patel describes the New Deal as „characterized by a maze of divergent tendencies and by intellectual omnivorousness“ (p. 192). The same could be said of his book, which is both astounding and smothering as a work of synthesis. The author's fluency and mastery with many bodies of scholarship is on evidence throughout. In one seventy-page chapter, for example, we learn, among other things, what Ethiopians thought of Swedes, the name of the Habsburg immigrant who sold the Eiffel Tower twice for scrap metal, and which James Cagney film helped canonize the G-man.

The penchant for the anecdote is matched with one for numbers. In the same chapter, we learn the length in kilometers of gravel road built in Iran in the 1930s (5000), the number of typewriter ribbons used by the government printing office (650,000), the amount in dollars that a Boston lawyer took as a pay cut to move from private practice to the Department of Labor (100), and the number of John Smiths in the Washington, DC phone book (more than 30). One is reminded of the scene in the 2000 film „Wonder Boys“ where the author protagonist is encouraged to consider removing the part in his sprawling novel devoted to „the genealogy of everyone's horses and the dental records.“ The author declines.

The omnibus approach, however diverting – can be diverting. It leaves the reader wondering how to create a hierarchy of information. Chapter titles are little help, offering neither operable analytical concepts nor theses: „Into the Vast External Realm“ and „Redefining Boundaries“ are vaporous cases in point.

Patel's criteria for inclusion can be elusive. An obvious yardstick would be to select those influences that had the most notable influence. One thinks of the example, in the outward direction, of the Tennessee Valley Authority replicated worldwide, as Patel himself notes. There is no counterpart in the reverse direction. In one promising and ultimately symptomatic case, he spends a dozen pages on the glimmers of interest in the idea of Sweden and their cooperatives only to concede that the policy went nowhere. One of

the problems with being an honest historian of Foucault in the swamp is being forced to admit how much knowledge sinks nearly unseen.

It is no coincidence that the narrative comes into sharpest focus in the final chapter, which provides a recap of the „New Deal for the World“ moment of the 1940s.¹ The attention to the global is organic here: it rises without cajoling from the material itself. It is also here that one feels most acutely that much of what preceded was a book in search of an argument.

In the absence of such an argument, the facts, figures, and anecdotes can appear as overcompensation for the lack of a forceful thesis. The ex post logic of the argument is inescapable. Just as an older FDR adorns the cover, American globalism is the always-clear endpoint of the book; this teleology reduces the capacity of the book to offer a reservoir of unrealized futures. As we read in the conclusion of the first chapter, „America was not yet ready to accept the vacant position of global leadership“ (p. 44). Patel’s approach suggests that this globalism was always latent.

The gamble of the „global history of everything“ approach is that the tack will pay off: new insights will be spawned and narratives forever decentered. Just as historians now find it impossible to conceive of the French Revolution without thinking it alongside its radical Haitian interpretation, an ambitious author might hope that it will be no longer be able to think the New Deal without also recalling its many inputs and inspirations from abroad.

By this admittedly high standard, Patel’s success can only be judged a conditional one. Yet his own professed aim was less revisionist than additive. In the final lines of the book, he shares his modest goal: to show that „the New Deal shared more with processes in other parts of the world than is normally recognized“ (p. 300). More than a „global history“ of the New Deal, the book might be better thought of as a provincialization of the New Deal, showing its resonances with New Deal-like events worldwide. The comparative payoff may ultimately be the best one.

As an overview, the book is compelling and will offer an excellent text for courses on the

1930s. Patel’s basic challenge may also be instructive in our present era of rising nationalism and globalist backlash. It is simple enough to find traces of internationalism when they are being proudly trumpeted as in the case of FDR’s globe during the wartime and the immediate postwar moment. Much more difficult is to find footprints of the global in an era where they are being assiduously erased – when every nation has a stake in declaring its own self-sufficiency, autonomy, and, in Patel’s preferred term, „insulation,“ from an order that extends beyond its own borders. We can only hope that histories of disavowed transnationalism in an era of resurgent nationalism will not have to hide behind pictures of the whole earth.

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¹Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World. America’s Vision for Human Rights*, Cambridge, MA, 2007.