

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick D. Reagan. *Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning 1890-1943.* Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000. xii + 362 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-230-1.



Reviewed by Robert Cuff (Department of History, York University (Toronto))

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Patrick Reagan, an historian at Tennessee Technological University, has written a first-rate study of executive-level attempts at economic and social planning during the 1930s and early 1940s. The National Resources Planning Board (1939-1943) and its bureaucratic predecessors, the civilian agencies most central to the story, have received varying degrees of attention in New Deal historiography. In *V Was For Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (1976), for example, John Morton Blum made conservative congressional attacks on NRPB after Pearl Harbor symbolic of a general wartime backlash against New Deal liberalism, a theme now common in accounts of the wartime domestic scene. Taking a broader perspective, Otis Graham in *Toward A Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon* (1976) interpreted New Deal efforts at policy planning as part of a useable past for erstwhile planners in the late 1970s. More recently, Alan Brinkley in *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (1995) has traced NRPB's role in policy struggles over the meaning of liberalism for the postwar social order.

Reagan takes these and other studies into account but also makes his own distinctive contribution. On the interpretative level, no one has so firmly linked the national planning impulse of the 1930s to the intellectual and organizational history of the pre-New Deal era. In

this sense, *Designing a New America* may be read as an archaeological excavation of New Deal managerial ideals. In making the case for continuity, or for a broader historical context, Reagan provides an impressive synthesis of recent historiography (and an excellent primer for graduate students) on an array of issues related to the planning impulse, including progressive-era urban reform; mobilization during World War I; welfare capitalism; social science policy-making; and inter-war attempts at voluntary economic stabilization.

Biographical studies of key Board members comprise five of the book's eight chapters, an approach, of course, that reinforces the sense of linkage between the 1930s and networks of policy advocates in prior decades. Included are detailed portraits of Franklin Roosevelt's uncle Frederic A. Delano, a former railroad executive whom Reagan regards as the father of New Deal planning; University of Chicago political scientist Charles Merriam; institutional economist Wesley Clair Mitchell; Massachusetts business executive Henry S. Dennison; and Rockefeller foundation manager Beardsley Rumel. While all five chapters draw on primary as well as secondary sources, and all are worth reading, those on the lesser-known Delano and Rumel contain the freshest material. Rumel's career trajectory from philanthropy manager to a member in 1935 of Roosevelt's planning board is partic-

ularly intriguing.

In a certain respect, the biographical material is so strong that the reader comes away a bit uncertain about the story's administrative dimension—of how and why the National Planning Board of 1933 evolved into the NRPB of 1939, and what exactly those agencies did during their ten-year existence. I also think the author repeats the description of a seamless historical web a bit too often when he might better have added a page or two on what exactly had changed in approaches to nation-wide

planning in the period he covers. But these are simply quibbles about a piece of work that's impressive as both interpretative scholarship and original research.

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