

question that most often came to mind while reading it. Akenson's description of modern covenantal cultures and their breakdown could be read as typical of how modernity (and later post-modernity?) transforms and erodes premodern ethno-religious identities. Covenantal cultures may be more coherent and self-contained than common forms of nationalism, but is this a difference of degree or kind? Akenson does not sufficiently address the theoretical issues scholars of nationalism have been posing. Nor does he deal with the more inchoate use of covenantal language common in some nationalist traditions (the United States quickly springs to mind).

The book's payoff comes in the conclusion, where Akenson reiterates that the ancient Hebrew covenant forms "the single most powerful cultural construct yet built by humankind." (349) He suggests that policy makers need to take these societies seriously, and not simply denounce them as archaic, irrational, or morally benighted. Covenantal cultures can be dealt with, but most effectively from within an understanding of their mindset and an ability to speak their codes. They require time to redefine themselves and make new ideas their own, and will compromise only on their terms. Akenson makes an evenhanded (but probably controversial) point in a world lately preoccupied with nationalist and ethnic conflict.

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Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (de Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press 1991).

Roger Biles' *A New Deal for the American People* attempts to evaluate the impact of the New Deal on the lives of Americans both in the immediate Depression Years, but also its legacy some fifty years later. Biles claims to re-interpret the New Deal in light of recent scholarship of this crucial historical period. Yet, Biles' re-interpretation is limited by his asking the basic question: Was the New Deal a "radical" break with the past, or a "conservative" achievement?

Biles addresses this question by reviewing the historiography of the New Deal period. In this sense, the book introduces the unin-

formed to the standard historiography of the New Deal. Biles informs the reader about the flurry of governmental programs dealing with banking and finance, labor, industry, agriculture, and relief and social welfare. If there is anything new in this book it is the attention Biles pays to Blacks and women, two groups often ignored by the mainstream of New Deal literature. But even here, like the more familiar topics of labor, banking, industry, and agriculture, Biles offers little in the way of an analysis, explanation, or interpretation. Rather, he describes the various programs from a very top-down frame of reference.

Biles concludes that the New Deal was not a "revolution." Many of the programs were inherited from the past and the New Deal, taken as a whole, was not very innovative. And worse yet, the New Deal program "failed" to restore economic prosperity. But, Biles informs the reader, the New Deal did make some lasting changes. For example, the expanded role of the federal government in economic matters of regulating banking and finance, changes in relationships between workers and employers, government protection of the rights of workers to join unions of their own choosing, the growth in importance of the executive branch of the federal government, the expansion of the Democratic Party and changes in urban politics, and the creation of a limited welfare state are some of the changes that the New Deal stimulated in American life in the past 50 years.

Biles argues that the fact that the New Deal conserved more than it changed is understandable, since the American "people have consistently chosen freedom over equality." Why this is the case, is left unanswered. In fact, the reader is left with little analysis of the complex relationships, political and economic, that shaped the New Deal program. But for Biles to offer an explanation, some analysis of literature beyond the standard historiography would have had to be included. Surprisingly, little is mentioned about the Left and its impact on various programs. Extra-parliamentary struggles are non-existent. The role of the Communist Party in the industrial union movement is virtually ignored and the question of political repression is never asked, never mind answered.

Biles' book is a concise standard account of the New Deal program. By ignoring a

broader spectrum of New Deal literature, such as recent work on theories of the state, social movements, and class relations in sociology, economic crises in economics, to name just a few, Biles falls short of being able to explain convincingly the impact of the New Deal for the American people and its implication for the contemporary period.

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Steven Biel, *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910-1945* (New York: New York University Press 1992).

Can “radical” writers produce great works, live virtuously, and change the world? This book examines a generation of intellectuals in the United States who believed in these possibilities. Like reformers, revolutionaries and other iconoclasts in subsequent eras, they achieved much less than they sought, and their experiences raise pertinent questions about the historical role of progressive intellectuals in North American politics during the twentieth century.

Biel examines the lives of a community of American writers born between 1881 and 1899 who did most of their publishing between 1910 and 1945. Their ranks included both the relatively obscure and the undeniably illustrious. Among the most famous were Walter Lippmann, Edmund Wilson, John Reed, John Dos Passos, Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, and Margaret Sangster. Because he was an “independent” intellectual and an acerbic social critic, H.L. Mencken is also included in this examination, although the author acknowledges that his politics depart from those of his largely leftist contemporaries.

What united most of these individuals was their determination to apply their craft without benefit of university affiliation, and in a way that would inspire the working classes to eliminate or at least radically transform American capitalism. The progressive writers’ new world order would be humane, non-exploitative, and culturally enriched. Intellectual work — from poetry to historical writing — should serve the cause of social reform. Ivory tower academics who sought to

keep their distance from life’s gritty struggles were dismissed as elitist — corrupted by the lure of tenure and the privileges of professional status.

Their desire to marry politics and art led to some extraordinary adventures and some influential publications. The romantic escapades of John Reed in Moscow and his myth-making book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, shaped the way thousands of North Americans, particularly leftists, subsequently perceived the Russian Revolution. Magazines such as *New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Masses* were important forums for creative, critical writing. The social and literary criticism of Lewis Mumford and Edmund Wilson and the political journalism of Walter Lippmann reached large, appreciative audiences. Van Wyck Brooks even received a Pulitzer Prize for his lively portraits of American politicians.

Of course there was some irony associated with such successes; fame and plaudits were enjoyed by these former heretics long after their political dreams had faded. Edmund Wilson became positively right wing after the Second World War, while Lewis Mumford’s acclaimed books reflected his difficult intellectual journey from communism to humanism. *Life* magazine treated Brooks’s biographies as patriotic Americana, which is not exactly what the author had had in mind.

Even before the era of Cold War disillusionment, many of the cultural activists were felled by the potent force of paradox. Favoring the “cult of poverty” over the evils of acquisitive materialism, socialist intellectuals discovered that industrial workers sought to avoid poverty at all costs and to accumulate as much wealth as possible. University employment might be considered appropriate only for intellectuals without integrity, but in order to survive, a number of writers made their own Faustian pacts by profiting from commercial journalism, public lecturing, or other forms of entrepreneurialism. (On the eve of the depression Walter Lippmann was earning \$45000 a year). Others lived off inheritances which also supported their friends.

In addition, some cultural activists justified the politics of the Communist Party even after it was exposed to be the relentless enemy of the “independent” intellectual. And while paying lip-service to gender equality, several