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The Works Progress Administration (1935-1943):  
Social Safety Net, Central Planning or Political  
Pragmatism?

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## The Works Progress Administration (1935-1943): Social Safety Net, Central Planning or Political Pragmatism?

“We shall tax and tax, spend and spend, and elect and elect” – Harry Hopkins, Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, in 1938<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction

This paper surveys the existing scholarship on the Works Progress Administration (WPA) with an attempt to synthesize the differing ways in which researchers have viewed the WPA into a coherent framework. The research question, the theoretical framework around which the paper progresses, is to explore the evolving historiography on the WPA. Was it a “social program”, offering relief to those suffering from the poverty of the Depression? Was it an “economic program”, an attempt to use government central planning and jobs-creation as a tool for managing the economy or for perhaps to create a larger, long-term, role for government in the US economy? Or, were the shape and policies of the WPA the result of political pragmatism, and therefore a means by which Roosevelt could maximize votes during his years in office?<sup>2</sup>

The short answer, as shown in this paper, is that scholars have interpreted the WPA as being all of these things. It is clear that Roosevelt wanted to make a federal government works program part of the permanent federal government

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (2006), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Here I am following the research methodology proposed by Karl Lamprecht as paraphrased in Georg J. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (1997), who recommended for historical writing, “a conscious approach to a subject of research by means of theoretical questions and methodological principles,” p. 32. For the historiographical synthesis exposition on the New Deal, I have attempted to find journal articles with references made to both the New Deal and the WPA (although have chosen some which do not mention the WPA, because, as will become clear, research specific to the WPA is a more recent phenomenon) and monographs on the New Deal which also cover the WPA (again with the same caveat) published in the last 20 years. Works specific to the WPA usually, but not always, place the WPA in the larger context of the New Deal. It is safe to say, given the cognitive limits inherent in any research, that I have missed some of the works within the above-mentioned parameters.

bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> However, the fact that this attempt failed shows that the WPA was tempered by political pragmatism during the life of the program. Roosevelt did not have full agency to carry out WPA programs as he saw fit and needed to balance competing political claims. A pure central planning program, one where government has the mandate to set prices (wages), would not require relief criteria for those deemed employable by the program. Yet, WPA workers were employed by the government, and local program administrators had discretion to set wages up to a federal maximum, so it was a government employment (economic) program, albeit one tempered by the need to not “undercut” the market for private sector employment.

The remainder of this Introduction aids the reader by presenting some facts on the WPA and the New Deal, then an overview of the historiography of the New Deal under which the WPA was situated. The main body of the paper presents the survey of scholarship on the WPA itself.

### *The WPA*

The Works Progress Administration was the largest program created by the Roosevelt Administration; during its 8 years of operation “nearly one-fourth of all American families were dependent on WPA wages for their support”<sup>4</sup> and at its peak (November 1938) there were 3.3 million employed by the WPA<sup>5</sup> out of a total workforce of approximately 52 million. In total the WPA employed 8 million people who had 30 million dependents<sup>6</sup>. Its initial appropriation in 1935 was for \$4.9 billion, or, 6.7% of GDP<sup>7</sup> and total spending during its life-of-program was

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<sup>3</sup> The Roosevelt Administration proposed to Congress in 1936 the creation of a Department of Public Works and Welfare, based on “the WPA model of a strong, centralized Federal administration powerful enough to cut through the layers of Federalism,” Richard M. Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime: The Origins of Intergovernmental Lobbying and Administration,” *Polity* 31 (1999), p. 442. This new cabinet-level Department was not approved by Congress.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report on the WPA Program* (1947), p. iii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Scott Smith, “The New Deal Order,” *Enterprise and Society* 9 (2008), p. 524.

\$12.9 billion.<sup>8</sup> The WPA, which operated in all 48 states<sup>9</sup>, built approximately 480 airports, 78,000 bridges 40,000 public buildings, 67,000 miles of city streets, 24,000 miles of sidewalks, 24,000 miles of sewer lines, 19,700 miles of water mains, 500 water treatment facilities and 572,000 miles of rural highways.<sup>10</sup> People who worked for the WPA were paid by the US government, however a WPA project had to have a state or local government sponsor who contributed either in-kind or budgetary support to the project. In December 1942, with the United States engaged in World War One, President Roosevelt declared that “a national work relief program is no longer necessary” and asked that the WPA be liquidated.<sup>11</sup>

### *The New Deal(s)*

Historiographical consensus (see for example Kennedy 1999<sup>12</sup> and Goldberg 2005<sup>13</sup>) is that there was in fact two separate New Deals.<sup>14</sup> The first New Deal in

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report on the WPA Program*, p. 124. The US Government spent a total of \$10.1 billion in appropriated funds while state and local sponsors of the WPA programs spent a total of \$2.8 billion.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the “blue collar” public works programs of the WPA, which is the focus of this paper, there was also the “white collar” programs of the WPA. The WPA employed approximately 60,000 writers, painters, sculptors, musicians, actors and stage-hands in the Federal Art, Writer’s, Music and Theatre Projects. There is a rich “subfield” about the art created under the WPA, but this literature is beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956*.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report on the WPA Program*, p. v.

<sup>12</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929 – 1945* (1999)

<sup>13</sup> Chad Alan Goldberg, “Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal: The Workers Alliance of America and the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1941”, *Social Science History* 29 (2005)

<sup>14</sup> Other writers believe that there was a third New Deal (see for example Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime”), which might be considered an effort at *consolidation of power* after winning a landslide election in 1936, when Roosevelt attempted to re-organize the Supreme Court by adding more justices with the Judicial Reorganization Bill of 1937 and a second attempt to create a cabinet level works program with the Executive Reorganization Act of 1939 (both the 1937 Bill and the 1939 Act failed to pass Congress. A revised 1939 Act did pass Congress which re-organized the various works programs into a consolidated Federal Works

1933 (FDR's famous "first 100 days") can be considered an attempt at *economic recovery* and consisted of efforts to control agricultural and industrial output and prices with the Agriculture Adjustment Act (AAA) and the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).<sup>15</sup> The NIRA also created the federal government's first major work relief program, the Public Works Administration, under which the Civilian Works Agency employed 4 million people<sup>16</sup> and the Truth in Securities

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Agency, but this was not at Cabinet-level). The National Labor Relations Board was also deemed constitutional during this "Third New Deal" and in addition Roosevelt received passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act which created a federal minimum wage and federally-mandated limit to the work week.

It might also be viewed that Keynesian economics was entrenched in the body politic by this period, with the appropriately named (and "popular", see James E. Sargent, "Woodrum's Economy Bloc: The Attack on Roosevelt's WPA, 1937-1939," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 93 (1985), p. 190.) \$3.75 billion Pump-Priming Relief Act, passed in June 1938. It should be noted however that Richard T. Jensen, "The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 19 (1989) writes that Keynesian demand management was "not chosen in the 1930s" though admits, "Some historians have suggested that Roosevelt was moving towards Keynesianism by 1937 or 1938," p. 572.

Smith, "The New Deal Order," shares the Keynesian view and states "the 'end of reform' [was] a journey away from the 1933 statist intervention of the National Recovery Administration's industrial codes to the manipulation of fiscal policy....", p. 527. A *consolidation of power* theory for a third New Deal might include then an entrenchment of a Keynesian approach to economic management. It is debatable whether or not Keynesian economics is 'central planning' but it is certainly not 'free market capitalism' because it means that government has a role in planning the economy through manipulation of taxing and spending policies.

<sup>15</sup> The NIRA, which created the National Recovery Administration, was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935 and the AAA, which created the Agriculture Adjustment Agency, was declared unconstitutional in 1936. However, "major features [of both Acts] were revived in subsequent New Deal laws that were upheld," Jim Powell, *FDR's Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (2003), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> The CWA was discontinued by the Roosevelt Administration as it was seen as too expensive and as prioritizing "relief" over "recovery," Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, pp. 176-177. The CWA offered "regular hours of work" and "going wages," Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (1999), p. 285. In other words the CWA was a non-relief government works program, something that the New Deal was not again to achieve.

Kennedy also writes that Roosevelt was against government employment and did not want a permanent federal government relief program. "In January 1934 Roosevelt told his advisors: 'We must not take the position that we are going to have a permanent Depression in this country,'" Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929 –*

Act, which added federal oversight of the stock market to the already existing individual states' oversight under American federalism.

The second New Deal (1935-1936), which might be classified as one of *social reform*<sup>17</sup>, created the WPA, the National Labor Relations Act (which guaranteed the right to collective bargaining and strike actions), the Social Security Act (which created old age pensions, unemployment insurance, and Medicare and Medicaid), the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (which guarantees deposits at regulated banks) and the Federal Housing Administration (which guaranteed housing mortgages). All but the WPA have been the lasting legacies of the Roosevelt era, and represent the transition to the modern American state<sup>18</sup>. Major reform (and thus perhaps the New Deal broadly conceived) ended with the Congressional elections of 1938 ("the pro-spending contingent" became a minority for the first time since 1934) and the 1942 elections "were disastrous to social policy advocates."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it might be safely assumed that it was political opposition which ended the New Deal even prior to US involvement in World War Two .

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1945 (1999), p. 176, and, "Working for the government might become a habit for with the country, he brooded, just as Hoover had worried earlier," Ibid., p. 170. However, this view does not seem to coincide with repeated attempts at creating cabinet level works and reliefs programs.

<sup>17</sup> Goldberg, "Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal", p. 345, uses the term *welfare reform* to describe the 1935-1936 New Deal period but this terms has come to mean something different with the Clinton administration reform of welfare programs, so I am using the term *social reform* to differentiate the concepts.

<sup>18</sup> I am using the term "American state" here to represent what Edward Nell, "Lectures during the New School for Social Research Seminar on Transformational Growth" (2008), calls the shift in the capitalist stage of human development (which, in a stadial analysis of history is the stage of development after feudalism) from 'early capitalism', when the governments consumed less than 10% of national income, to our current epoch of 'modern capitalism', where the state consumes approximately 40% of national income. Thus, viewed from a classical stadial approach of to the study of history, the relevant question might not be whether the solidification of the welfare state under the New Deal "saved" capitalism or "destroyed" capitalism, but how did it change capitalism. See Daniel Levine, *Poverty and Society: The Growth of the American Welfare State in International Comparison* (1988) for a comparison of the growth of the welfare state in the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, and Denmark, and Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*, for a history of American government social programs beginning with colonial America.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin Amenta and Drew Halfmann, "Who Voted with Hopkins? Institutional Politics and the WPA," *The Journal of Policy History* 13 (2001), pp. 263-265.

*An overview of New Deal scholarship*

The first wave of interpretive historiography on the New Deal (which can be placed prior to the 1970s) was a “left-right” dialogue on the effect of the New Deal on American capitalism.<sup>20</sup> The “left” believed that the New Deal did not go far enough in redistributing wealth nor in creating central planning, but which did however do its job in curtailing what progressives called “economic royalism” in certain of its economic reforms. The “right” believed that Roosevelt went too far towards socialism and replaced the American free enterprise system with a welfare state. Bernard Sternsher states that the “liberal-centrist defenders” of the New Deal believed “the New Deal was a practical, democratic middle way between left and right totalitarianisms”<sup>21</sup>. According to John Braeman by 1972 a “new consensus” had developed, with three main areas of agreement,

First, that the New Deal was committed to the preservation of the capitalist system through the elimination of its worst abuses and the establishment of minimum levels of existence for the mass of the nation’s citizens; second, that Roosevelt personally, and the New Deal generally lacked any master plan for reshaping the American social order and thus dealt in *ad hoc* fashion with specific problems; and third, that the New Deal inaugurated the modern-day “broker-state”, with its unequal distribution of benefits among different interest groups depending upon their political and economic muscle.<sup>22</sup>

By the 1980s scholars were classifying New Deal historiographies as ‘traditionalist’ and ‘revisionist’<sup>23</sup>, with the revisionists believing that the New

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<sup>20</sup> See for or example John Braeman, “The New Deal and the ‘Broker State:’ A Review of the Recent Scholarly Literature,” *The Business History Review* 46 (1972) and Bernard Sternsher, “Victims of the Great Depression: Self-Blame/Non-Blame, Radicalism, and Pre-1929 Experiences,” *Social Science History* 1 (1977) for excellent and brief summaries of New Deal historiographies prior to the 1970s. See Powell, *FDR’s Folly*, p. viii, for a critique of the political histories of the Great Depression and the New Deal for their lack of including economic analysis available since the 1960s which show that New Deal policies prolonged the worldwide Great Contraction of 1929-1933 into the Great Depression in the US with private sector employment levels not recovering until after World War Two.

<sup>21</sup> Sternsher, “Victims of the Great Depression,” p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> Braeman, “The New Deal and the ‘Broker State’,” p. 409. Also see Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime,” p. 417, for additional references on the *ad hoc* nature of the Roosevelt Administration which Flanagan refers to as pragmatism.

<sup>23</sup> See John Joseph Wallis, “Employment, Politics and Economic Recovery during the Great Depression,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 69 (1987), for a brief survey on revisionist and traditionalist New Deal literature.

Dealers pushed their idealism-based social and economic reform as far as they could on the American populace given political limitations while the traditionalists believed that Roosevelt only proposed and implemented the minimum amount of social reform necessary to save capitalism from the radical movements which were prominent elsewhere in the world.

The traditionalist views that Roosevelt and his administration controlled the agenda during the New Deal might be considered as the ‘institutional’ theory of history, which believes that the state has agency in driving policy.<sup>24</sup> Adherents to this ‘state-centered’ theory of history are most prominently Theda Skocpol and Ann Schola Orloff.<sup>25</sup> The revisionist views have been based on what is known as the ‘political’ theory of history, which states that state agency is tempered by the need to garner votes and is limited by the party system in politics. Prominent adherents to this school are Francis G. Castles and Alexander Hicks.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to this “top down” or institutional-political historiography of the New Deal, there has been in the last 20 years<sup>27</sup> a “bottom-up” social history on the attitudes and experiences of those who were affected by the high levels of unemployment<sup>28</sup> during the Great Depression, unemployment which of course the

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<sup>24</sup> Institutional and political theories of the New Deal have are criticized for not taking into account “the unorganized and inarticulate, the Negro, the sharecropper, the tenant farmer and the migratory worker,” Braeman, “The New Deal and the ‘Broker State,’ p. 410.

<sup>25</sup> Edwin Amenta and Jane D. Poulsen, “Social Politics in Context: The Institutional Politics Theory and Social Spending at the End of the New Deal,” *Social Forces* 75 (1996), p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> I am using 1990 as a benchmark for the beginning of social history on the New Deal because Jensen, “The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression,” writes in 1989, “Among the thousands of studies on the 1930s, there are few on the social history of unemployment or relief,” p. 553. Lizabeth Cohen’s *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, was published in 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Unemployment averaged 17.8% in the years 1930-1940 (data from Michael R. Darby, “Three-and-a-Half Million U.S. Employees Have Been Misaid: Or, Explanation of Unemployment, 1934-1941,” *Journal of Political Economy* 84 (1976), calculation by author). I am using the period 1930 – 1941 to calculate the average unemployment during the Depression because the first stock market “crash” occurred in late 1929 and by 1941 the US was fully engaged in military production. In 1929 unemployment was 3.2% and in 1942 it was 4.7%.



WPA was meant to address.<sup>29</sup> This history-from-below takes many shapes, including a consensus that workers (e.g. the unemployed) blamed themselves and not others for their unemployed status and this is why the US did not have stronger radical political movements like other countries who experienced the Great Contraction of 1929-1933 (see Sternsher 1977<sup>30</sup> for a review of the literature, although McGovern 2000<sup>31</sup> takes the counter-position stating that the ‘positive’ and upbeat attitudes of Americans is what prevented longer-lasting radical social and political movements). Cohen 1990<sup>32</sup> makes the argument that workers in Chicago became interested in politics and felt part of the New Deal (and especially the WPA) due to the failure of ‘welfare capitalism’ and locally-based ethnic and religious groups to provide a social safety net as the Depression wore on and employers and local organizations were unable to meet worker expectations due to economic hardship.

Also as part of the social history<sup>33</sup> on the New Deal there has been research which might be termed “gender” or “family-based”, which has shown the effects of the relief programs on the paternalist family (See Cohen 1990<sup>34</sup> and Goldberg 2005<sup>35</sup>). However feminist historian research on the New Deal seems to be lacking,, “historians have largely ignored their [women’s] plights”<sup>36</sup>. The racial aspects of the New Deal have also been a part of the historiography. Shlaes 2007 shows that

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<sup>29</sup> There is also a newer body of literature which synthesizes the institutional, political and history-from-below positions which deals more directly with the WPA itself; this literature is addressed later in this paper.

<sup>30</sup> Sternsher, “Victims of the Great Depression”.

<sup>31</sup> James R. McGovern, *And a Time for Hope: Americans in the Great Depression* (2000).

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the social history, there have been several works related to the New Deal effects on the environment, see Smith, “The New Deal Order,” p. 527, fn 14, for a bibliography. Environmentalists “charge that the New Deal’s large hydroelectric projects promoted an imperialist view of resources, leaving nature to be exploited by a coercive, undemocratic power elite composed of technically-minded engineers and narrow-minded bureaucrats,” *ibid.*, p. 527.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, especially, pp. 246-249.

<sup>35</sup> Goldberg, “Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal,” p. 346.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Fearon, “Women, the Radical Left, and the Fight Against the Ravages of the Great Depression”, *Reviews in American History* 36 (2008), p. 426.

unemployment rates for blacks were at least twice that for whites in some cities<sup>37</sup> and Sugrue 1998<sup>38</sup> makes the case that New Deal housing policies exacerbated negative race relations by ‘redlining’ residential neighborhoods. Powell 2003 states, “Black people were the major victims of the New Deal”<sup>39</sup>.

There are two, more recent, trends in New Deal historiography, these are cultural and comparative histories. For example Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt’s America, Mussolini’s Italy, and Hitler’s Germany, 1933-1939* (2006) makes a cultural comparison between the mass “propaganda” campaigns used in the New Deal programs with the methods used by Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy for state-building and Jonathan Harris in *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (1995) explores the ‘cultural populism’ created under the cultural production of the WPA’s Federal Art Project. Finally, both Schivelbusch and Jason Scott Smith in *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (2006) make the case that public works programs helped to ingrain a larger role for the state in people’s lives. This latter trend in New Deal historiography is more fully explored below.

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<sup>37</sup> “Under the NRA [Administrator] Ickes had authority to set production quotas, an authority he used to curtail supply in the name of driving up prices,” Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (2007), p. 151. Curtailing (restricting) output leads to greater unemployment as less workers are needed for production as production is decreased. The 2004 Nobel Memorial Laureate in Economics, Edward Prescott states, “I think these institutions and actions [NRA] are what caused the Great Depression,” quote from *The Economics of the Great Depression: A Twenty-First Century Look Back at Economics of the Interwar Era*, Randall E. Parker, editor (2007), p. 22. It was this high level of unemployment, effecting blacks as a percentage more than whites, which lead some to call the NRA the Negro Removal Act, Negroes Robbed Again, Negro Rarely Allowed and Negro Run Around among other pejoratives, see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (1981), p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1998).

<sup>39</sup> Powell, *FDR’s Folly*, p. xi.

## II. Historiography of the Works Progress Administration

Despite the fact that around 6% of working Americans during the Great Depression were employed by the WPA, most of the literature relating specifically to the WPA has been of a recent nature. For example, Amenta and Halfmann 2001<sup>40</sup> write that the WPA has been “understudied”<sup>41</sup> and Smith 2008 proposes that historians have missed the changing priorities of the American state by overlooking the, in real and relative terms, large spending on public works programs in the New Deal.<sup>42</sup> Given the recent nature of research specific to the WPA it is has not been possible to find a survey on consensus views about the nature of the WPA in relation to our research questions as outlined in the introduction, so I will need to state directly what this research has been to date.

### *Recent Views on the Works Progress Administration*

Two works, Flanagan 1999<sup>43</sup> and Smith 2008<sup>44</sup>, using the WPA as ‘object’ of analysis, have drawn similar conclusions that the WPA public works programs helped to ingrain a larger role for government in American society. Unlike what might be expected, this larger role does not include a larger role for the government as an employer, but government as a means by which the economy can be managed through Keynesian economics.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Edwin Amenta and Drew Halfmann, “Who Voted with Hopkins? Institutional Politics and the WPA”, *The Journal of Policy History* 13 (2001).

<sup>41</sup> As evidence of the lack of importance of the WPA in earlier political histories which include the New Deal, neither Theda Skocpal’s *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (1992) nor David Plotke’s *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (1996) have an index item for the WPA, whereas Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (1999), Powell, *FDR’s Folly* (2003), and Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man* (2007) all contain the WPA in their index.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, “The New Deal Order,” quotes Schumpeter, “The budget is the skeleton of the state, stripped of all misleading ideologies,” p. 523, fn 6.

<sup>43</sup> Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime”.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, “The New Deal Order”.

<sup>45</sup> John Maynard Keynes’s *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* was published in 1936, though had been circulated prior to that, and calls for an active role government to create “demand” during times of economic downturn through ‘fiscal stimulus’ (increasing government debt). It had been argued however (see Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, especially, pp. 356-359) that the New Deal was already “Keynesian” economics (the initial 1935

Richard Flanagan, who labels himself a revisionist<sup>46</sup>, uses the WPA as a center of analysis when he makes the argument that the New Deal represents a major shift in the political nature of American federalism. In Flanagan's narrative the WPA was used by the Roosevelt administration to gain the support of the nation's mayors by reducing the cities' fiscal burdens during the time of the Depression, and that this represents "the origin of intergovernmental lobbying and administration".<sup>47</sup> This federal – city partnership in turn helped to create a stronger American administrative state, even though the hoped-for (by Flanagan) rationalized federal policies toward urban issues were not completed prior to the end of the New Deal<sup>48</sup>.

In 1933 American city mayors first asked that Roosevelt use the Hoover administration-created Reconstruction Finance Corporation to purchase municipal financial instruments due to the lack of demand in private markets<sup>49</sup>; this initial attempt at collaboration beyond fiscal federalism as practiced historically failed due to lack political will. However, as unemployment in the cities increased the United States Conference of Mayors put pressure on the Roosevelt administration to create federal works projects, and employment, in the cities. Flanagan even goes

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appropriation for the WPA was after all almost 7% of national income) before the concept of "Keynesian economics" became part of the vernacular. Many of the ideas Keynes recommended in his February 1, 1938 letter to Roosevelt had already been implemented by the New Deal, albeit not to the degree in which Keynes was recommending. The WPA was especially "Keynesian" in that Keynes believed "durable investment must come increasingly under state direction," Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 357, excerpt from Keynes' 1938 letter to Roosevelt. For the full letter see Howard Zinn, *New Deal Thought* (1966), pp. 404-409.

<sup>46</sup> Flanagan is a revisionist in that traditionalist literature sees Roosevelt as skewing government spending toward these South and Southwest (See Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, for the case that this helped to 'de-industrialize the North), whereas Flanagan makes the case that the urban center and problems of industrialization were also a Roosevelt priority. Nonetheless, Flanagan, "Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime," might also be classified as synthesis between the state-centered and politics-centered models because the paper is about strengthening the state through political collaboration.

<sup>47</sup> Flanagan, "Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime," p. 415.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450.

<sup>49</sup> Sixty of the largest one hundred American cities were in default by the end of 1933, Flanagan, "Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime," p. 420.

so far as to say that “The WPA was an urban program” and states that by 1936, “10% of the electorate in the cities...were on the WPA payroll”<sup>50</sup>.

The mayors liked the WPA because it funded popular projects like school repair, road and highway work, and improved parks, libraries and sewer systems. The WPA spending also took pressure off city “regular” capital and operating budgets.<sup>51</sup>

Flanagan also ties-in the WPA’s presence throughout the country to congressional support for a more centrally-managed economy, “With so many Federal dollars flowing into every Congressional district, the first Keynesian-style appropriations expenditure passed virtually without Congressional opposition”. While the mayors continued to support WPA employment projects in the cities, the more oppositional Congress elected in 1938 attempted to remove this type of WPA federal-municipal patronage and instituted a quota system for WPA jobs, based on population, “placing limits on the administration’s discretion over the program”. Flanagan also believes, like other revisionists, that the New Deal transformations to the welfare state were incomplete, “The politics of New Deal Federal urban policy fits the pattern of ‘patch-work state-building’” and the New Deal changes were “incomplete and *ad hoc*”. However if we view the WPA’s impact on gaining support for federal government management of the economy through “Keynesian-style” fiscal management, we see that the WPA contributed to a permanent shift towards a permanent place in the belief that there is a role for government in managing the economy of the US.<sup>52</sup>

Jason Scott Smith also attempts to bridge the traditionalist-revisionist division over ideology by using the WPA as the center of analysis and like Flanagan has determined that the WPA helped to create a shift in US political culture towards Keynesian economics. Smith states that the use of political economy as a tool in historical analysis, and “its application to United States history between the 1920s and 1940s helps to clarify the relationships between politics, the economy and liberalism”<sup>53</sup>. Smith proposes that the WPA with its large public works programs has helped the federal government to become a larger part of most American’s lives. Smith writes that the segregation of analysis between agency (which can

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 430.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 430.

<sup>52</sup> All quotations in this paragraph, *ibid.*, pp. 432-445.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, “The New Deal Order,” p. 521

mean the latter period, history-of-everyday life, scholarship and how the New Deal effected the lives of those living through it) and structure (the analysis of the state and lawmakers, be it within the political or institutional schools of analysis) is a false trail. Using the WPA as the unit of analysis, Smith shows how a “New Deal order” was created through “an impressive range of projects” built under the WPA.

By using the lens of political economy to focus on the New Deal’s public works spending, we can begin to see the outlines of a different interpretation. The huge amounts of funds devoted to public construction, the far-reaching federal efforts invested in directing this money, and the long-run impact of infrastructure itself form the components of the story of a public works revolution. This revolution helped justify the new role of the federal government in American life, legitimizing – intellectually and physically – what has come to be known as Keynesian management of the economy.<sup>54</sup>

The state assumed, through the WPA, a much larger role in the economic life of the American people, and this increased role was legitimized by the physical works created by the WPA. Smith’s view, like Flanagan’s, is one step beyond that of the previous New Deal scholarship, where it was social welfare which was prioritized, now we are on to a more “central planning” economic historiography of the New Deal, using the WPA, the New Deal’s largest program, as the focal point for the state – economy transition.

Amenta and Paulson<sup>55</sup> also synthesize the traditional and revisionist theories with what they call the “Institutional Politics” model. The authors use socio-metrics (econometric regression analysis using non-economic information put into metrics form) to analyze the correlation between political interests (labor movements, patronage, political party organization, voting rights) as the determining factors for

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 524

<sup>55</sup> Amenta and Poulsen, “Social Politics in Context”.

determining levels of Old Age Assistance spending and WPA wage levels<sup>56</sup> on a state-by-state basis in 1940<sup>57</sup>.

Amenta and Paulson believe that their data support the fact that pro-spending ‘actors’ are limited by institutional constraints, but that the actors themselves are responsible for the gains made in social spending, in which the New Deal “was the most important period in U.S. social spending history”<sup>58</sup>. The author’s believe that the lack of suffrage for blacks in the South is what limited the wages in the southern region for WPA programs and that states in the North where the Democratic party had stronger alliances with labor is where WPA wages were greater than states where party-union alliances were more fragmented.<sup>59</sup> Unlike whereas Flanagan 1999<sup>60</sup> saw a strong coordination effort between mayors and the New Dealers under the patronage provided by WPA, at least for the years 1936 – 1939, Amenta and Poulson believe, “One basic institutional condition was the sheer fragmentation of political authority, which hindered the efforts of the New Dealers to induce local polities to embrace national policies”<sup>61</sup>. Therefore given this constraint the authors look for local institutional strength to support pro-social spending and find that states in the North with strong labor safety commissions

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<sup>56</sup> WPA maximum wage levels were set regionally by Congress, see U.S. National Resources Planning Board, *Security, Work, and Relief Policies* (1942), p. 76 for regions and wage levels. However U.S. Federal Works Agency, *Final Report on the WPA Program*, gives details on hours worked and total wages paid which vary intra-regionally. Therefore although the maximum wage allowed under WPA projects was controlled by Congress, the number of hours worked and actual wages paid varied locally as set by local administrators of WPA projects, Amenta and Poulson, “Social Politics in Context,” p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> Note that Amenta and Poulson, “Social Politics in Context,” explicitly label the WPA as “social spending”; they come firmly down on the side as the WPA as a social, not an economic, program.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> Amenta and Poulson, “Social Politics in Context,” proposes that where the local Democratic party does not have strong ties to labor the local politicians are less likely to promote federal social spending locally as it ‘crowds-out’ their own ability for patronage. Additionally, see Amenta and Halfmann, “Who Voted with Hopkins?,” for another socio-metrics oriented paper on WPA wages under the Institutional Politics thesis which analyzes Congress-member voting patterns for WPA legislation, especially p. 255.

<sup>60</sup> Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors and the New Deal Regime.”

<sup>61</sup> Amenta and Poulson, “Social Politics in Context,” p. 54.

tended to have higher WPA wages. The “Institutional Politics” thesis supports the research question that the WPA was a program of political pragmatism.

The last paper in our survey on recent research related directly to the WPA deals with the issue of organized labor’s (in this case the Workers Alliance of America) relationship to the government and to the WPA workers. Goldberg 2005<sup>62</sup> believes that the WPA was a hybrid between a social program and an employment program, and uses Bourdieu’s theory of “classifications struggles” to support this thesis. The WAA, which represented the WPA workers, attempted throughout the WPA’s life-of-program to achieve “equal pay for equal work”, an attempt which was unsuccessful; the “security wage” under the WPA was seen as to more akin to the “supplemental wage” of relief programs and less than the “living” wage which was the usual demand by labor<sup>63</sup>. In addition, although despite the fact the WPA workers were employed directly by the government and had the right to collective bargaining, they were forbidden to strike, a right which was given to other workers under the New Deal.<sup>64</sup> This reconfirms the hybrid work – relief nature of the WPA as it worked in practice.

The WAA consistently attempted to make WPA work at a parity with private sector employment in terms of rights and wages, yet as Goldberg points out “the Roosevelt administration designed the WPA as a compromise institution in part to manage these conflicts”.<sup>65</sup> On the one hand the administration wanted to provide work relief instead of hand-outs to those in need but able to work, but on the other hand did not want to pay a wage which would discourage leaving the WPA for employment for higher wages in the private sector. In addition Goldberg believes that the experience in unionism that WPA workers gained with the WAA carried over to union activism after the WPA ended and workers found employment with the private sector. This is also consistent with Lizabeth Cohen’s thesis in *Making a New Deal* (1990) on the rise of the labor movement in Chicago.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ginsberg, “Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal”.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>66</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, especially pp. 291-360.



### III. Conclusion

It has been argued by David M. Kennedy in *Freedom from Fear* (1999) that President Roosevelt did not want to create large segments of the American population dependent on the government for relief or employment in the earlier stages of the New Deal<sup>67</sup>. However as the Depression continued it has been shown in this paper that Roosevelt did want to create a permanent federal government department for works projects, something he was not able to achieve. We have seen that WPA public works projects were placed in areas where it was expected that public spending and WPA jobs would create votes for Roosevelt's reelection<sup>68</sup> and that President Roosevelt consciously built-up relationships among local and state politicians (who were at the least WPA program sponsors) to best determine project priorities for the purposes of political pragmatism. We have also seen it argued that the WPA embedded a strong federal government state-orientation in American culture and that the WPA patronage helped to ensure passage of the first overtly Keynesian fiscal economics spending appropriation, the Pump-Priming Act of 1938.

In summary we cannot say that the WPA was either purely central planning nor purely a social safety net, because it was a hybrid of both. However we can say that the WPA as it evolved was due to political pragmatism because it was used to garner votes for the Presidential elections. In addition, the WPA was also a tool of 'state-building', something which helped to create a shift in American culture from one with a limited role for government in American society to one where a larger role for government was accepted by the American people. This larger role, the role for "Keynesian-style" economics, continues through today where the call for "stimulus packages" by politicians is part of the everyday debate in the American *body politic*.

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<sup>67</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, especially p. 176.

<sup>68</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President of the United States of America four times, the only President to be elected to third and fourth terms. The Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, ratified in 1951, now limits President to two terms in office.