2. Describe and analyze the historiography—rather than the history—of the New Deal.

I.

I would like to begin by proposing a periodization of the interpretative narratives (history writing) about the New Deal which will then allow us to address a response to questions posed in this exam theme.[1] By the 1970's we see a body of work around the question of what was the end result of the New Deal on American capitalism (Braeman 1972).[2] "Right" historians (*conservatives*[3]) believe that the New Deal veered too much towards socialism and replaced the American enterprise system with a welfare-state and "left" historians (*liberals*) see that the New Deal state does just enough reform and intervention to "save" the American enterprise system and would like to have seen more redistribution, more regulation and more central planning.[4] (This ideological *liberal* and *conservative*-based analysis is an example of one major division of opinion among historians of the New Deal, in what follows we find there are others.)

Liberals also believe that the New Deal was able to curb what FDR and the New Dealers called "economic royalists.[5]" We can see this manifested in such liberal reform as the minimum wage, laws against child labor, federalization of the regulation of the securities market and special rights given the labor union

[1] This present exam essay is a revised, expanded, updated and corrected version of the term paper I wrote for Prof. Oz Frankel's Historiography and Historical Practice seminar at the New School for Social Research in the Fall 2008 semester.

[2] I prefer the term "the American enterprise system" (following Veblen, who died right before the first stock market crash of 1929 and who was the first economist hired for the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research) as opposed to "capitalism" as the latter term suffers from use-inflation although there is a trend now in academia to analyze capitalism in a systemic manner and not all of it ideological Marxist reductions.

[3] Klein 2003 finds that two political categories emerge in the 1930's era, liberals, or the Left, and conservatives, or the Right. We will stick with this convention here.

[4] It is only later (with exceptions) that historians begin to focus as a rule more on other categories of analysis such the New Deal's treatment of women, people of color, the environment and other narratives. We shall explore these categories of analysis when most appropriate in the periodization.

[5] What a previous age would call "robber barons."

movement. Further "liberal-centrists" believe that the New Deal reforms were enough to save the American democratic tradition, "the New Deal was a practical, democratic middle way between left and right totalitarianism" (Sternsher 1977: 137). According to Braeman by 1972 a "new consensus" had emerged amongst historians around three major results of the New Deal,

> 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[6]; 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 (1972: 409).

More radical historians of course would like to have seen the overthrow of the capitalist ruling class with a worker's revolution. For example Howard Zinn [1980] 2005 (an early example of cultural history or bottom-up history, or history-from-below, and an example of a work which is both scholarly and a perennial best-seller[7]) believes that workers gained more rights prior to the New Deal and

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[6] Flanagan (1999) refers to this *ad hoc* experimentation as "pragmatism," consistent with the dominant American philosophy of the 1930's era.

[7] There is a "graphic adaptation" of Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire* (2008) which of course covers entry into WWII during the New Deal. The comic book version of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* came out not too shortly after the monograph itself in 1944, and with a print-run of 600,000 copies (a condensed version of *Serfdom* was published by *Reader's Digest* the same year). There is also a graphic edition of journalist Amity Shlaes' best-seller *The Forgotten Man* (2007) which was published in 2014. Too we have the *Politically Incorrect Guide to the Great Depression and the New Deal* (Murphy 2009).

We can find in this category under a different medium the "Hayek v. Keynes" youtube series of videos, which were produced in reaction to the Financial Crisis of 2007-8 and co-written by George Mason University economist Paul Roberts. These videos, called "the fight of the century," highlight and debate the laissez-faire ("liquidationist") arguments during an economic downturn (using the Great Depression as the data-point) versus the macro-economic intervention proposed by Keynes. I show these videos to most of my students. When we started the Fall 2013 semester the first of these videos had one million views. By the end of the semester there were three million views. Today (August 23, 2015) there are more than 5 million views. I was an "extra" in the second of the series, which tells its story through the rap-video artform. (Later we discuss the art production which is funded by the American state during the New Deal.)

that the NLRA of 1935 entrenched the labor movement into the Establishment, purposefully ending the radical agitation of the 1920's.[8]

II.

In the 1980's we begin to see more revisionist history, and discussions on the natures of agency and structure in historical interpretations of the New Deal.[9] This highlights another division of thought in the New Deal historiography, the difference between "traditionalist" and "revisionist" historians.

Traditionalist history ascribes agency to the State (an "institutional" theory of agency which is "state-centered") and we find that, as previously noted, the New Dealers (and the administrative state bureaucrats) reform the American enterprise system just enough to save capitalism. Skocpol and Orloff are prominent practitioners here. The *revisionists* have a "political" theory of historical change, where reform is limited by the needs to conform to democratic convention, both electoral requirements and the demands of political parties. Here we find that New Dealers push their liberal redistribution and social reform as far as possible until met by democratic limits, prominent revisionists are Castles and Hicks.

Garraty (1973) finds that the limits of democracy are expanded during the 1930's era by a "crisis psychology" combined with FDR's charismatic leadership and Higgs (1987) find the growth of government in the period abetted by a "national emergency." (Fear as change agent is a common theme in New Deal histories, which is made manifest in the title of one of the canon of the field, Kennedy 1999, *Freedom from Fear*, discussed later.)

We also see the emergence of critiques against top-down history and the emergence of more interest in the New Deal's effects on gender and color (which

[8] Zinn, quoting the contemporary (1934) Marxist writer Paul Mattick, "All that is really necessary for the workers to do in order to end their miseries is to perform such simple things as to take from where there is, without regard to established property principles or social philosophies, and to start to produce for themselves" (2005: 395).

[9] The next two paragraphs are based on Wallis (1987) and Amenta and Paulsen (1996). Amenta and Paulsen propose a synthesis between the "institutional" and "political" theories of historical change during the New Deal.

is carried further in our next époque[10]). Sitkoff (1981) is an early example here. The national crisis of high unemployment affected blacks more than whites. It was this high level of black unemployment which lead some people at the time to call the NRA, "the Negro Removal Act," "Negroes Robbed Again," "Negro Rarely Allowed," and "Negro Run Around," among other pejoratives.[11] Sugrue (1998) claims that New Deal housing policies exacerbated negative race relations by 'redlining' residential neighborhoods. Powell (2003: xi) states, "Black people were the major victims of the New Deal."

Further on race and gender, Spalter-Roth and Hartmann (1994) find that the purpose of the SSA's Aid to Depend Children Act was designed to keep mothers out of the workforce and at home to care for their children so that they can be productive citizens and Suzik (1999) claims that the CCC camps, run by the US Army, is a form of the militarization of society in order to form "citizen-soldiers."

III.

Towards the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's, New Deal historians believe there is too much ideology revolving around history-writing concerning the category of *structure* (viz. top-down history where action is limited by institutions) and not enough focus on individual (and group) *agency* as effecting these structures. Jason Scott Smith writes of William Sewell.

> Rather if we are to attempt to address this seeming dichotomy between structure and agency in a productive way, scholars on either side of this issue might benefit from considering how historian William Sewell has handled it. Indeed, Sewell's own intellectual trajectory, encompassing history, anthropology, political science, and sociology, is itself instructive in this regard. Rather than viewing structure and agency as in an unchanging, static, opposition, Sewell argues that we instead recognize that

[10] Perhaps instead of proposing definite chronological borders to themes in history-writing, it is best to claim historiographical trends as reaching a consensus (per Braemann 1972) or some type of critical mass at a given time with outliers.

[11] Later in our chronology Shlaes (2007: 151) finds that unemployment rates for blacks were at least twice that for whites in some cities.

> "enactments of structures imply a particular concept of agency – one that sees agency not as opposed to, but as constituent of, structure" (Smith 2008: 529)[12]

So it is at this point where we begin to see more "people's histories," and see the interaction among people's (and/or groups of people however defined) daily lives and local environments and the larger structures in which people live, and then how individuals and groups interact with and influence larger institutional and historical trends.

We give several examples. The first is Cohen 1990, a work of new labor history, who explores the "making of a new deal" by examining the lives of factory workers in Chicago. Cohen finds the factory workers become politically-active because the social insurance benefits promised to them by their employers ("welfare capitalism") have failed to provide as anticipated due to the underlying economic hardship in Chicago.[13] For Cohen this social safety net is replaced by a (not sufficient) "worker statism" afforded by the New Deal.[14] We also find how

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[12] Sewell has the concept of a Significant Event, which occurs external to the structure of the society we are interpreting and which changes this structure. For the New Deal, of course, this Event is the worldwide Great Depression, again our "fear," "security" and "emergency" narratives, which of course are occurring simultaneously to both the people of the United States and the government it elects, and then the democratic interaction occurring contemporaneously.

[13] In Cohen 1990 we also observe how these factory workers and their families appeal directly to FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt for security through archival research of correspondence, "everyday" Chicagoans reaching beyond their immediate social structure.

[14] Another example of a historiographical division of opinion can be made, between Cohen (1990) and Klein (2003). Cohen finds that welfare capitalism demises with the New Deal "worker statism," whereas Klein finds that private insurance companies (and public-private partnerships in social provisioning) are part of, and supplement (through interest group negotiation) the New Deal's social insurance. Therefore "welfare capitalism" and the New Deal continue to operate together and influence each other as groups interact over rights to provide and receive social insurance.

Klein (2003) divides the "shaping" of "America's private-public welfare state" into three interest groups; business, labor and the state, with a central thesis being that business negotiates a place for itself in the provisioning of social insurance for profit, a kind of "triangulation" is occurring as each interest group negotiates with one another, the result as mentioned, a continuation, not a negation, of "welfare capitalism."

> By the 1940s life insurers believed that Social Security had been a tremendous boon to the sale of insurance and old-age pensions. Insurance executives instructed their agents to

local, immigrant ethnic group, religious, local philanthropic groups, and other mutual aid organizations are replaced by this "welfare capitalism" (something echoed in Beito 2000).

The New Dealer rhetoric effects the expectations of the common person. Cohen describes the evolution of her category of "worker statism."

> They [Chicago factory workers] did not reject private ownership of property but favored a form of capitalism that promised everyone, owner or worker, a fair share. A *Fortune* survey in 1940 was surprised to learn that "the man on the street wants more income than he has, but no more than that of many a government clerk." Apparently, American workers were dreaming neither of a dictatorship of the proletariat nor a world where everyone was a successful capitalist. Rather they wanted government to police capitalism so that workers really would get that "new deal" they deserved. Kornhauser reported that the majority of workers favored empowering the government to redistribute wealth (Cohen 1990: 286).

We also learn from Cohen that the Chicago factory workers are resentful of those employed by the WPA and that these workers are not at all radical, unlike Zinn's garment and railroad workers of the 1920's who agitated from the rank-and-file.

> incorporate the new Social Security program in their sales pitch, emphasizing that federal old-age pensions would meet only the barest subsistence needs (Klein 2003: 207).

A second main argument for Klein is that the New Deal period comes to culturally define "security," what expectations are made of this by the interest groups and how it evolves over the *long 1930's era* (1920 to 1950). This concept is of course a continuation of the field's fear-security-emergency narrative as reflecting the culture in the 1930's period. (What is missing from Klein's monograph most fundamentally are the tax code changes which encourages employer-provided health care packages as they are written-off pre-tax, a power grab over union-provided benefits who don't get these tax break, and, to the detriment of those not engaged in the corporate sector. Additionally these tax incentives can explain the decline of the first labor-owned insurance company, the Union Labor Life Insurance Company (ULICO), which was formed in the mid-1920's).

A third theme in Klein is one of discontent. Klein understandably laments the inefficient social system which has evolved in American society since the 1920s. It is piecemeal and inefficient. Like Zinn she finds that compromises have made labor-based agitation part of the Establishment and which has prevented more the negotiation of a more secure "security" through liberal redistribution.

More radical union leaders were concerned the New Deal policies would merely turn the Chicago workers into Democrats or Republicans. This despite Cohen finding in these factory workers a class consciousness different from the middle classes.

The next example we use here in our category of cultural or people's history from this period of New Deal history writing is Beito (1989).[15] Beito finds that despite the American Revolution being founded partly on a tax strike, there has been scant work in this category in New Deal histories. Beito's entry point is 1900 to1929 where he finds very little agitation against taxes, it is only with the 1929 stock market crashes and subsequent depression do we find a significant spike in tax protests.

The largest tax revolts in the 1930's era are against increases in local taxes; property tax and sales tax. More than half the municipalities in the United State are bankrupt by 1933 so need to, and less successfully, attempt to, raise taxes, igniting protests. (As the downturn continues and tax increases don't add revenue, municipalities receive funding from the RFC –from Hoover to mostly Republican mayors and from FDR to mostly Democrat mayors - and, later in the New Deal, municipalities receive public works assistance from the PWA and the WPA, with federal support covering 90% of the budget for these works.)

Beito states that Weber (1919) "creates a whole debate over how governments achieve and maintain legitimacy" (Bieto 1989: xiv).

> In localities far and wide, they[16] took the leadership in unprecedented "pay-your-taxes" campaigns, which were nothing less than undisguised advertisements, backed up by threats of force, to bolster state legitimacy (Ibid.)

[15] We can here easily view political differences in the scholarship of Beito (1989) and Cohen (1990). Beito is concerned about the "landed-class," and the requirement to pay more property taxes, people who have no doubt been in the United States longer than Cohen's recent immigrants, and are therefore more likely to own real estate. And we can compare this with Klein (2003) who laments that more redistributionist reforms did not occur to allow a more secure social safety net, something Beito's more established "taxpayers" would not have enjoyed.

[16] Beito states that the main tax advocators are the Association of Real Estate Taxpayers and "civic reformers, academics, and officials of professional government organizations" (1989: xiv).

Denning (1996) is a significant contribution to the emerging trend of the writing of New Deal history from the bottom-up, in this case analyzing the relationships among "plebian" cultural producers (artists involved in many and diverse fields from visual arts and graphic arts to the performing arts, the textile arts, literature and radio, specific attention is paid to Orson Wells) and the CPUSA and commercial mass culture. These artists have family resemblances (some similar, some more distant) with the Popular Front in the long1930's era and therefore categorizes these creative-types as the "cultural front." Denning labels his cultural history as being of "the age of the CIO" (and from 1934 to 1964). His socialist and communist fellow-travelers include "plebian immigrants," "anti-fascist emigres," Mexican muralists and other "radical moderns." In cities wracked with labor strife a "cooperative commonwealth" evolves amongst the two fronts.

We learn as the period advances how mass culture is formed and with the help of the cultural front, who Denning categorizes as "mental labor." The underlying theme here is that these social and artist radicals take their art and ideology with them as they help shape and form (sometimes commercial and sometimes artistic) culture, and are in turn in many cases shaped and formed themselves (again the interplay between structure and agency). For example there is case study on the Luce publishing empire, who employs cultural front photographers, writers and designers and the creative tension between "mental labor" and their employer. We learn of the censuring and the negotiation, we also learn that in the end, with the American Century and Red Scare that some of these relationships must part ways. Although the cultural front must end, influence lives on in the work of black writers, jazz and blues and country music, gangster movies and film noire.

[What is missing from Denning's analysis and of interest to the present writer is how earlier in the 1930's era film noire the federal police agent is depicted as the enemy of the people. But by the middle of the period even James Cagney plays FBI agents. We find this too in the labor art of the period (for Hapke 2008, mostly oil paintings). In the earlier part of the era (until around 1935 when the AFL is the predominant union) the policeman is seen as in cahoots with "capital." And by the mid-late 1930s (the period of CIO ascendency and relative AFL decline) the policeman is depicted in cahoots with "labor."]

A little more about categories and assertions in Denning. We find that the terms "labor" and "industrial democracy" enter the vernacular, we learn that culture emerges as an industry, and that labor, as in giving birth, is difficult. We combine these categories and relationships together and find that the "cultural front" contributes to the birth of mass entertainment and education.

Two more (brief) examples of the cultural history of the New Deal from the 1990's we can mention here, both related to the New Deal-funded art production.[17] The first is Bustard (1997), the archivist at the US National Archives who curated the exhibit *A New Deal for the Arts*. This is an example of *national culture*-building. Bustard states the art production of the New Deal is the largest intervention into the arts in American history, the purpose of which is to promote American art and culture in order to deliver what FDR called "an abundant life" and "spiritual renewal."

This art, for the most part, celebrated the common man and woman (mass culture) and its dominant themes are American Regionalism and an American version of Social Realism. The New Deal built 100 federal Community Art Centers, at least one in all 48 states. Bustard claims that it was in these centers that many Americans saw a painting for the first time. Harris (1995) calls this New Deal art production the building of a "democratic culture" and calls this art "official" culture as opposed to "national" culture.

> The Federal Art Project generally and the Community Art Center program in particular were established to resist and reverse such centralization, specialization and resulting alienation of "the artist" from "the people." This alienation had become especially acute, it was believed, during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Harris 1995: 48).[18]

IV.

Our current period of New Deal scholarship is what Jason Scott Smith (2008) terms the "political turn." Smith finds that historians of the New Deal are now looking at institutional power relationships through the use of political economy and political history (for example, we describe above in some detail Cohen 1990, Denning 1996 and Klein 2003).

[17] A later contribution to the cultural history of the New Deal is Schivelbusch (2006) where he compares the national culture creation (propaganda campaigns, public works in the form of Brutalist architecture and militaristic back-to-the-land programs) occurring simultaneously in Italy, Germany and the United States in the 1930's era.

[18] Some of the New Deal art administrators believed that there were too many artists in the big cities (especially New York City) who were too influenced by European modern art.

> While using the concept of political economy in this fashion can aid in providing a more complete understanding of the New Deal order[19], it also has broader uses. More generally, attending to political economy – to the deeper relationships of power, inscribed in institutions and organizations – presents historians with an opportunity to advance a broader rethinking of political history that a variety of scholars have advanced….In sum, with so many US historians embarked upon taking a political turn in their work, it seems the concept of political history can help us in asking significant questions about the concrete institutions, social practices, labor relations, and policy regimes that have helped to shape the economy and society over time (Smith 2008: 528).

Another example of Smith's political turn is Katznelson (2013), where he determines that New Deal spending is not centered mostly in Northern cities as found in previous scholarship (cf. Flanagan 1999), labor unions in the North of course part of the New Deal electoral coalition. Instead the South is a spending priority for New Dealers, introducing what he considers another division of opinion in the historiography.[20] Katznelson draws this conclusion by departing from the focus on the FDR administration to interpreting the behaviors of members of congress and finds that significant change agents are Southern politicians who support the New Deal, up to a point.

The major theme in Katznelson is that FDR is fearful of the international scene, and is specifically concerned about fascism and corporatism in Europe and the worldwide economic depression. To counter this we find that one the New Deal's primary motives is to build up a national security state and a larger military presence abroad.[21] Public works spending is used for military-build up purposes (as well as the more visible public works in almost every county in the United States), Katznelson claims more so in the South than in the North, military spending which can become much more overt after the out-break of WWII. This military build-up in the United States ultimately changes social structure worldwide.

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[19] See Wagner (2007) for the differences between an "order" and an "organization."

[20] This claim has been disputed, for example Amenta and Paulsen (1996) have already written that New Deal monies are used in the South because unlike the North with high labor union support for Democrats due to the NLRA of 1935 less spending there is needed. Social, and as we now find from Katznelson (2013), military, spending in the South is necessary to ensure the necessary votes. Amenta and Paulson also find that one of the reasons for less unionization in the South is because of less secure voting rights for much of the population.

[21] We already find the New Deal using cultural production and the CCC for the militarization of society in Schivelbusch (2006) early in the New Deal.

We find that Southern politicians support the New Deal social reforms as long as reform does not include disturbing the (*de facto* segregationist) Southern society. Katznelson states thus that the New Deal reforms are kept in a "southern cage" by a "Jim Crow Congress" (there is a limit to structural change). For example in 1935 the NLRA of 1935 was passed with southern support.

> With the exception of gains on the docks of in New Orleans and in the packinghouses and steel mills of Birmingham, the South was largely left out the union surge of the 1930s. Labor organizing in the South faced high hurdles. The region was less industrialized than the rest of the country, and its factories were widely dispersed in small and middle-size towns where resistance was relentless (Katznelson 2013: 183).

Southerners were also instrumental in the New Deal's militarization efforts prior to the US's entry into WWII.

> Combined with southern control of key foreign relations and military affairs committees, their nearly unanimous support for activist overseas policies made it possible for the House and Senate to endorse a massive buildup of warships and planes, make thousands available to America's allies, and sponsor the swift conscription of some 900,000 Americans during the initial phase of the country's first peacetime draft. (Ibid., 281).

We learn of the change in the structure of the United States (and the world) brought about at the end of the New Deal with WWII and which forms "the origins of our time."

> By combining military know-how with scientific research and business leadership, the United States mastered the art of unrestricted war. Demonstrating that democracies could, in fact, solve the biggest problems, the country learned to act as if it were one great unified corporation, a cohesive company that superintended economic, social, and military mobilization on an almost unimaginable scale (Ibid., 353).