E. Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2021.

The New Deal mattered and matters, historian Eric Rauchway proclaims in this beautifully (and passionately) written book. Just raising the eyes or travelling through the United States provide ample evidence of this. The New Deal is literally everywhere in today's America. "We all live in it – Rauchway writes – it gives structure to our lives in ways we do not ordinarily bother to count on or catalog (…) like the proverbial

fish that does not know it is wet because it never leaves the water, we sometimes have trouble discerning the properties and extent of the New Deal because it is the medium through which we move all the time" (p. 7).

The New Deal shaped and transformed, materially and figuratively, the country. It changed its landscape; it altered the fundamentals of its political economy; it affected everyday lives. This transformation was economic, social, political and cultural. The element connecting all the different threads was of course democracy: how to defend and reinvigorate it in an age when authoritarianism was on the rise, and the faith of American citizens in the democratic system had been shattered by its inability to shield them from poverty, injustice, and economic insecurity. The New Deal, Rauchway argues in the introduction, "gave Americans permission to believe in a common purpose that was not war"; it offered them the possibility to rally "around an essentially peaceful form of patriotism" (p. 3).

The message clearly resonates today. The book was written during the last phase of Trump presidency, possibly the most explicit flirtation with authoritarian solutions in recent times, which culminated in Trump's attempt to reverse the outcome of the elections and in the dramatic assault on Congress of January 6, 2021. Rauchway reminds readers not just of the importance of the New Deal, but also of the strength and resilience of American democracy. The New Deal thus matters, he maintains, as a message the past offers to today's Americans: that "democracy in the United States, flawed and compromised as it was, proved it could emerge from a severe crisis not only intact but stronger" (p. 3).

To make his case, Rauchway takes the reader through a fascinating tour in space and time, in search of illustrative New Deal artifacts and examples that are still very much with us, but of which we are often unaware. From the Arlington cemetery – and the graves of World War I veterans killed in Washington in 1932, members of the improvised "Bonus Army", protesting and demanding the payment of a lump sum (a "bonus") originally due in 1945 – to the Clinch River and the Tennessee Valley Authority, from the Indian New Deal and the site – Window Rock, Arizona – where the Council of the Navajo National typically meets to the highways, roads and sidewalks built under the auspices of the New Deal, he offers a variety of highly illustrative, and never banal, examples. They reveal how massive public projects could stimulate the economy and help dragging the country out of recession. But they need to be understood not just in economic terms, simply as an indispensable stimulus. "Roosevelt and his advisors", Rauchway convincingly writes, "wanted the public works program to revive not

only the economy but also democracy" (p. 139). The New Deal was offering jobs and pumping resources into the battered U.S. economy, of course. But it aimed also at providing public goods and in doing so at creating a common purpose. The administration, Rauchway argues, "wanted to show Americans that as they worked for the government, so the government worked for them. The roads and sidewalks – and post-offices, schools, parks, playgrounds, airports, harbors, and innumerable other constructions – provided citizens public spaces in which we are not merely welcome, but which belong to us and give us pride" (p. 140). Hence the decision to extend New Deal funding also to art, which would produce a visual representation of its nature, objectives and ambitions, often celebrating labor and the common good in a variety of public spaces and buildings. An endeavor whose legacy is still very much visible today, as anyone with a bit of familiarity with U.S. post offices knows all too well.

Stimulating the economy, reviving (and re-legitimizing) democracy, increasing the offer of public goods: all those dimensions combined with another New Deal's most explicit goal, that of driving a modernization of the United States and, alongside with it, of a world that Washington was soon bound to lead and dominate. In a beautiful comparison (which, full disclosure, have immediately made it into the slides of my courses), Rauchway juxtaposes the architecture of two massive dams, Wilson Dam, Alabama (built in 1924) on the Tennessee river and Norris Dam, Tennessee (built in 1934) on the Clinch River. The former has a sort of neoclassical structure, typical of so many public edifices in the United States, which celebrate and appropriate republican virtues and good government. The latter, instead, soon became "a monument of the modernist moment, built (…) by and for the people of the United States of America, beholden to no ancient style but demonstrating instead the integration of sophisticated engineering with manicured nature" (p. 54). Le Corbusier himself drew inspiration from Norris Dam, the quintessential epitome of New Deal's modernism and modernity: of the idea that nature could be controlled and exploited, and that yet this appropriation could be done harmoniously via a full integration of these gigantic public works within nature itself (the French architect described Norris Dam as a "marvel of complete agreement and harmony between man and nature" (p. 63).

In hailing the New Deal, Rauchway does not (and could not) shy away from its most patent, and long studied, limits and contradictions, first and foremost how the pervasive racism and segregation in the South affected many of its programs, beginning with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), one of the most ambitious, costly and, soon, globally iconic, New Deal programs. And yet, a celebration of the New Deal

this book undoubtedly is. A celebration of its achievements, ambitions, and long-standing effects, we said. But also, if not more, of the collective vision and drive that made it possible.

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