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Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics In A Progressive Age



Synopsis

"The most belated of nations," Theodore Roosevelt called his country during the workmen's compensation fight in 1907. Earlier reformers, progressives of his day, and later New Dealers lamented the nation's resistance to models abroad for correctives to the backwardness of American social politics. *Atlantic Crossings* is the first major account of the vibrant international network that they constructed--so often obscured by notions of American exceptionalism--and of its profound impact on the United States from the 1870s through 1945. On a narrative canvas that sweeps across Europe and the United States, Daniel Rodgers retells the story of the classic era of efforts to repair the damages of unbridled capitalism. He reveals the forgotten international roots of such innovations as city planning, rural cooperatives, modernist architecture for public housing, and social insurance, among other reforms. From small beginnings to reconstructions of the new great cities and rural life, and to the wide-ranging mechanics of social security for working people, Rodgers finds the interconnections, adaptations, exchanges, and even rivalries in the Atlantic region's social planning. He uncovers the immense diffusion of talent, ideas, and action that were breathtaking in their range and impact. The scope of *Atlantic Crossings* is vast and peopled with the reformers, university men and women, new experts, bureaucrats, politicians, and gifted amateurs. This long duration of contemporary social policy encompassed fierce debate, new conceptions of the role of the state, an acceptance of the importance of expertise in making government policy, and a recognition of a shared destiny in a newly created world.

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Customer Reviews

Daniel Rodgers' thesis in *Atlantic Crossings* is simple and direct: "the reconstruction of American social politics was of a part with movements of politics and ideas throughout the North Atlantic world that trade and capitalism had tied together." (3) He concludes that from the 1870s through World War II, America was not an internalist or an imperialist nation, but instead these years saw an "opening" for social reformers in the U.S. to import foreign models and ideals from other North Atlantic countries. Furthermore, these imported policies and reforms (mostly from Britain and Germany) were not adopted in America (if at all) unchanged upon reaching the Atlantic's western shores, but instead were adapted to the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of American society and political structure. Finally, Rodgers argues, the seeds of the New Deal can be found in the activities and positions of the social reform activists of the last two decades of the 19th century and the first thirty years of the 20th century. Rodgers convincingly supports his thesis by describing "a largely forgotten world of transnational borrowings and imitation, adaptation and transformation" (7) from the 1870s through the 1940s, a time during which Americans had an abundance of solutions to the myriad social problems of their day. This "borrowing" was a process that changed significantly over time. Initially, Americans were primarily recipients of reform ideas from abroad. Later, during the prosperity of the 1920s, a more even exchange of social solutions took place among North Atlantic countries, which eventually led to "a great gathering...of proposals and ideas" in the New Deal.

This is the policy-side answer to Kloppenberg's *UNCERTAIN VICTORY*. While that book focussed on intellectual links between European (esp. German or French) thought and early American pragmatism, Rodgers seeks more practical applications, well into the 20th century. He is so well versed in the literature that scant references are made to secondary sources. It is rich in the literature of the time, particularly journals, magazines, and newspapers from several different countries. Interestingly, unlike Kloppenberg this book examines England and Scotland which provide springboards for American reforms. Rodgers' thesis is that the Europeans tried numerous policies which Americans learned about and then implemented, almost always later than their counterparts across the Atlantic--and sometimes with very limited success. The book is also noteworthy for some of the most practical applications of MODERNISM yet seen in contemporary scholarship. This is a hot topic, largely seen in discussions of art or literature. Here Rodgers takes all that knowledge, absorbs it, and then demonstrates it in action across the POLITICAL spectrum. Despite the enormous research behind it, Rodgers has written an enjoyable, readable work that is of considerable importance. After all, this is the author of the famous article, "An Obituary for the

Progressive Movement," (1970) which claimed that there NEVER WAS such a movement. Here Rodgers answers his own claim, saying that the American reform impulse built upon a European foundation and produced policies which survive to the present. My only complaint is that this book is slanted TOWARDS Europe, with maybe 60% of the discussion dwelling across the Atlantic ...

Professor Daniel Rodgers wrote his work entitled *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* in order to challenge the prevailing notion that much, if not all, of the reform that took place during the Progressive Era had its roots in America. Professor Rodgers charts the shift in American reform alongside that of Europe, beginning in the 1870s when American students first heard of the assailment of the laissez-faire style of government in German universities of the late 19th century. The U.S. benefitted from a transatlantic network that spread ideals overseas, and America was initially the recipient of these European ideals. As the network and American reform in general began to evolve, the trading of principles became much more balanced and intricate, eventually leading to the culmination of many ideas and proposals in the New Deal legislation. World War II ended this network, however, because of the disparaging effects it had on the North Atlantic nations. Following WWII, the U.S. shifted into an era of American exceptionalism as the country entered the Cold War. In *Atlantic Crossings*, Professor Rodgers argues that the "reconstruction of American social politics" started with an influx of political and social ideals from a network that was fueled and tied together by capitalism and trade among the countries of the North Atlantic (3). Professor Rodgers argues that all of the reform in the U.S. during the Progressive Era originated in Europe, and he tends to undervalue the difficult task American reformers completed in altering European ideals in order to fit certain American idiosyncrasies.

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