

A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh

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A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh, by Kenneth J. Heineman. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999. xv, 287 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

Reviewer Christopher Shannon is associate director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism at the University of Notre Dame. His research has focused on twentieth-century American social thought.

Kenneth Heineman has written an important study that should foster serious rethinking of the role of religion and regional variation in our understanding of the Great Depression. His account of Catholic labor activism in Pittsburgh challenges mainstream interpretations that have either demonized Catholicism as anti-Communist and anti-Semitic or dismissed religion altogether as a vital force in the lives of the working class. Labor priests and the predominantly Catholic leadership of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) advanced a distinctly Catholic vision of social justice based on the principle of subsidiarity, which demanded the maximum participation of citizens in the shaping of a society dedicated to promoting the common good. Lacking the numerical dominance they possessed in East Coast cities such as New York and Boston, the Irish Catholic leadership of Pittsburgh made special efforts to forge alliances across ethnic lines. In the process, Catholicism served as a powerful force for overcoming ethnic divisions and forging a significant working-class bloc within the New Deal.

Heineman opens his study with a dramatic account of the 1932 march on Washington led by a Catholic priest, Father James Cox. Inspired by the 1884 march of Social Gospel enthusiast Jacob Coxey, Cox set off from Pittsburgh with 6,000 unemployed men to protest President Hoover's handling of the economic crisis. Along the way, he was warmly greeted by Protestants in regions of rural Pennsylvania where crosses had been burned four years earlier to protest Al Smith's presidential candidacy. By the time he arrived in Washington, Cox had amassed a following of more than 12,000, the largest protest march in the nation's history. Hoover reluctantly agreed to meet with him, only to have the priest demand that the federal government raise taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals to fund poor relief, health care, and public works projects.

Hoover tried to brand Cox a Communist. Radicals such as A. J. Muste would later brand him a fascist for organizing blue shirt brigades modeled on the Gaelic Blue Shirt movement in Ireland. Heineman argues that these conflicting interpretations of Cox reflect the contradictory position of Catholic social teaching within the conventional left/right divide of the New Deal era. Labor priests such as Carl

Hensler and Charles Owen Rice expressed concern that public relief would undermine initiative and personal responsibility, but they did not defend rugged individualism. Catholics attacked finance capitalism and Soviet Communism as equally godless. Refusing to sacrifice ethics and morality to the quest for social justice, Catholic activists defended film censorship as well as the rights of workers. Catholics forged a distinct vision of Christian democracy that combined cultural conservatism with economic progressivism.

On economic matters, Heineman argues that Catholic social teaching was actually to the left of the New Deal. Drawing on papal encyclicals such as *The Condition of Labor* and *Reconstructing the Social Order*, Catholic CIO president Philip Murray rejected the New Deal vision of society as an assemblage of competing interest groups. Murray stressed the need for cooperation between labor and capital, but insisted that each industry have a directing council composed equally of representatives from unions, management, and government. In Washington, liberals and conservatives alike dismissed Murray's plan as granting too much power to workers.

Catholics, if not Catholic social teaching, did, however, play a central role in the triumph of the New Deal. In this respect, Heineman sees Pittsburgh as "an ideal laboratory in which to examine the social roots of the New Deal" (209). Against the East Coast bias of much urban history, Heineman insists that Pittsburgh's working-class population of Catholics, Jews, and African Americans was actually more diverse and less divided than that of New York City, and thus more representative of the national New Deal coalition. Irish Catholics played a central role in local Democratic Party politics, but the comparatively low numbers of Irish in Pittsburgh forced politicians to reach across ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries. Charles Rice took this political development as an opportunity to force Catholics to confront their own racism; the diocesan newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, urged its readers to join African Americans and Jews in a crusade against bigotry.

Heineman successfully argues for the centrality of Catholics in the consolidation of a multiethnic political coalition, but he is somewhat less convincing at the level of economic organization. The predominantly Catholic CIO's ultimate exclusion of Communists may have been a key to the legitimization of labor unions in the eyes of the government, but its exclusion of African Americans was just as important in winning the support of the white working class. At times, Heineman seems to let the views of racial liberals such as Rice stand in for those of the rank and file, and he attributes the whiteness of the CIO to African American hostility to unions (208). Catholicism was indeed "the

glue that bound together a large percentage of the working class" during the 1930s (210), but official Catholic teaching on racial justice proved incapable of binding the working class to the New Deal coalition when it shifted its focus from class to race in the 1960s.

The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered, by Robert Shulman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xi, 340 pp. Notes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Judy Kutulas is associate professor of history at St. Olaf College. Her research interests include radical intellectuals of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.

Robert Shulman sets out to redeem the 1930s writings of Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, Richard Wright, Muriel Rukeyser, and Langston Hughes from their literary consignment to the trashcan of left-wing political orthodoxy. Their interests in political causes, their commitments to American Communism, and their willingness to use literature and poetry to express political perspectives, he contends, have marginalized them as writers. When reconsidering their writing, however, Shulman was surprised "to realize how much good work was done during the Popular Front" (6). Ultimately, he concluded that what he calls the "left avant-garde" (7) was more diverse than he thought.

Shulman seems to want to take on a central assumption about the 1930s literary left, that it was the anti-Stalinist writers (Marxist opponents of the American Communist Party, most of them clustered around the *Partisan Review*) who were the modernist, creative, "good" writers of the period. He does not take that assumption on directly but challenges the *Partisan Review* authors' marginalization of left-wing authors such as Herbst and Hughes.

To challenge the assumption that his subjects were not worth much as literary figures, he devotes a chapter to each, discussing their 1930s political works in depth and, when appropriate, considering—and usually attacking—existing literary analyses such as, for example, Constance Coiner's fine work on Le Sueur, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olson and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995). Shulman's heart is clearly in encouraging an appreciation of his authors. He goes lovingly through their works, pointing out inventive ways of writing about political events, contextualizing poems, and discussing innovative forms and structures. He knows and appreciates his subjects' works, and he helps his readers appreciate them, too.

He does not, however, so effectively prove that these works were avant-garde, and he seems generally less mobilized to address his larger thesis. Some of his work has already been done for him. Barbara

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