

## A French New Deal?

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**France, too, had its New Deal: that is the thesis argued by the American historian Philip Nord, in a book that clarifies both political and cultural aspects of the strengthening of the French state from the 1930s to the 1950s. This is a thought-provoking reexamination of the past, appearing at a time when the institutions bequeathed by the French “new deal” seem to have been weakened.**

Reviewed: Philip Nord, *France's New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era*, Oxford & Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, 462 pp.

Half a century ago, in trail-blazing work that is more often cited than consulted, Stanley Hoffmann characterized France from the 1930s to the 1960s by the maturity, the troubles and then the reconstruction of what he called the “Republican synthesis”. In *France's New Deal*, the Princeton historian Philip Nord now suggests a rereading of these years of transition from the last days of the Third Republic, to the Fourth Republic under the Third Force coalition, once it had emerged from the successive manoeuvres of de Gaulle and then of the Communist party.

Drawing on advances in historiography, in French as well as in English, and on his own research in some little-used private collections (the Alexis Carrel papers at Georgetown, the Pierre Schaeffer archive in Montreuil, and the records of *Sciences Po* in Paris), he produces from them a reading that has an unquestionable richness: a history that is at the same time institutional, intellectual and social, the book has the original idea of approaching from two different angles the chronological sequence post-Popular Front 1930s, to Vichy, to Fourth Republic – the same period that Michel Margairaz, discussing economic and financial

policies, had showed constituted a “conversion”. The first angle is a general focus on the institutional embodiment of the program of the National Council of the Resistance, a veritable charter of the “new deal” that came with Liberation, and that endowed France with nothing less than national social (including health) insurance, economic planning, population management, and the *École nationale d’administration*. For the second angle, Professor Nord shifts the focus to cultural policies, which he selects for attention both because of the continuities lying beneath them throughout the period and because the reconstruction of France was for him a cultural at least as much as it was an economic phenomenon.

For that reason, the second part of his book consists of three chapters on cultural history, each of them analysing the evolution of three media of expression examined by the author, with the same periodization as in the first part. While these are of course not the first studies of radio, the theatre and cinema from the 1930s to the middle of the 1940s, they do qualify as the most convincing ones, by their being most closely connected with the contemporary political, ideological and social issues; and at the same time as the richest ones, by their opening up such a multiplicity of perspectives. So the warp, the story of a historic moment seized upon by the institutions that had shaped it, crosses with the weft, a set of politico-intellectual biographies of the actors, whether they be in leading roles (Laroque, Sauvy, Debré, Monnet) or influential men with trajectories, thought processes and worldviews as diverse as those of Robert Buron and Louis Jouvét, or Gaston Defferre and Jean Giraudoux.

### **Strengthening the State**

This portrait gallery leads Professor Nord to highlight the gradual appearance of a new ruling class. To him it appears insufficient to think of this class as technocrats, even though one of the major characteristics of the series of men portrayed here is precisely their conviction that a necessary and sufficient condition for rapid and sound reform consists of leaving to Parliament at most a residual place and ideally none at all – which is what was done, in contexts and with ideological substrata that were radically different, as much by the French state as by Free France and then the Provisional Government. Seeing this as illustrative of the period’s continuities, the author puts into perspective the rupture that the Popular Front would have constituted, and underlines the plurality of possible futures at the Liberation moment.

In contrast to the Resistance Left, who expected Liberation to bring real social reform, not to say social revolution, the players from August 1944 on (the author assembles them under the encompassing label “the not-so-Left”) put strengthening the state at the heart of national renewal, an idea shared by men as different as Charles de Gaulle, Jean Moulin and Adrien Tixier. Paradoxically, Moulin and Tixier do not appear in the book, even though both of them, during the brief moment that they were able to share the full measure of their talents, proved to be exceptional statesmen.

Let us have a closer look at that paradox. In the last few pages of his book, Professor Nord anticipates being criticized for reckoning that he could have applied his analysis to other institutions without changing his principal conclusions. This is indisputably true if he had examined, for example, the heritage side of cultural policies (whether in the case of museums, long governed by a 1945 regulation, or in that of archaeology, modernized from top to bottom by Jérôme Carcopino in 1941), but it would be less certain if he had taken a look at the sovereign state. In fact, entities as important as the Bureau of the Budget, the prefects, and the *Conseil d'État* changed only marginally during this period. Even worse: the only new institution – the *Commissariats de la République* – disappeared at the end of 1946, to the general satisfaction of the political class.

Moreover – and this is not a subtle difference from the New Deal – public officials had nothing whatsoever to fear from the judiciary. As we know, throughout his first term Franklin Roosevelt had to lead a veritable battle against the Supreme Court, and only in the spring of 1937 did he put a stop to its policy of systematically invalidating measures implementing the New Deal. Nothing like that happened in France: neither in 1936, nor in 1940, nor again in 1945 did the *Conseil d'État* try to pit the legal against the political, except perhaps when at the very end of the period, in what is a completely different story, it imposed its own view on postwar purges. The political context partly explains this situation. In 1944-1945 things proceeded in this exemplary manner because de Gaulle, a man of the state before he was a statesman, paid respect to the administrative and technical corps of the state – although his respect for the principle did not in any way stop him from sensing with bitterness the opportunism, to say nothing worse, which most of the high officials comprising these constituted corps demonstrated throughout the conflict.

We must also consider an analysis in terms of structures, as already spotlighted in the first decades of the twentieth century by the jurist Gaston Jèze, who described France as a republican regime built on a Bonapartist (both uncle and nephew) administrative framework. Enriched by the colonial and still more authoritarian Third Republic, this framework has stood the test of time. Bearing witness to this is the series of institutional bicentenaries that France has celebrated since 1994 (beginning – one must give honour where honour is due – with the *École normale supérieure* and the *École polytechnique*), a series that finishes in 2016 with the *Caisse des dépôts et consignations*.

### **A Legacy in Crisis**

In comparison to this continuity that nothing seemed to threaten, all of the institutions that appeared at the Liberation – with the exception of the *École nationale d'administration*, which survives, weakened, only at the cost of being permanently challenged – are now either in crisis, like national social insurance, or already dead, like a number of national enterprises or, even more characteristically, like the National Planning Commission (*Commissariat-général au Plan*). In the 2000s, the latter, admittedly already moribund in the 1980s, was finally and unceremoniously cast into the vast mass grave known as the reform of the state – which incidentally has been the fate of almost all of the public places where the difficult combination of reflection and action was being tried.

Basically, only one thing troubles me about Philip Nord's erudite, subtle and densely woven book: the title. Am I alone in this? In the course of his argument, the author himself thinks up other titles, which he rejects, one because of its unfortunate connotations in the United States (*Rebirth of a Nation*), another because it is a caricature (*The Vichy Origins of the Modern French State*). Like a [fly](#) buzzing around a stagecoach that I would like to have built, it is my turn to make a modest contribution to this debate. If we stick to the primary meaning of a “deal” as in a card game, which is also called a hand, and (at the cost of shifting metaphors) we notice that only one of the two hands of the social body (to pick up on the old biological imagery) was involved here, we could say that Nord is talking about *France's New Half Deal*. Alternatively, if we take the word in its other English (and its only *français*) sense, as a bargain or an agreement, we should be looking at *France's New Deals*, postulating that at the Liberation just as under Vichy some years earlier, a tacit bargain was being played out between the state and its high civil servants. Doubtless it was not a case of “everything changes so that nothing changes” but of “change lots without changing the essentials”. This

explanation enables us, in passing, better to understand the “failures of the purges” referred to by Raymond Aron as early as October 1945 in the first issue of *Les Temps modernes*, failures that still trouble France at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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