

And War Gave Birth to the American Leviathan

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World War Two marked the beginning of a new relationship between state and society in America. Turning away from a focus on regulation and welfare, the new state based its vastly extended authority on warfare. A study by James Sparrow points to an unexpected explanation for this sea change in traditionally anti-statist America: mass compliance.

Reviewed: James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Philip Roth hinted at a sustained disquiet in American political history when he invited us to “remember the energy” in 1945. Capturing this atmosphere, he wrote: “playing Sunday morning softball on the Chancellor Avenue field and pickup basketball on the asphalt courts behind the school were all the boys who came back alive, neighbors, cousins, older brothers, their pockets full of separation pay, the GI Bill inviting them to break out in ways they could not have imagined possible before the war.”¹ Indeed, before the war, it was impossible to imagine the national community that had supported the war effort and would be, until the 1970s, at the heart of the American *warfare state* studied by James Sparrow. For, it was precisely these neighbors, cousins, older brothers and other GI’s that were the co-signers and unrelenting force behind a new “wartime social compact,” a new American *Magna Carta*.² The pockets of pay coming from the state, the asphalt courts of public schools around the country, and the GI Bill described by Roth, may then be understood as a prolonged attempt to “buy back our boys,” make “citizen-soldiers,” and redefine “social citizenship through work”

¹ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Vintage, 1998), p 40.

² Not so coincidentally, just as the original was being hidden under lock and key in Fort Knox, in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor

(*Warfare State*, chapters 4, 5 and 6). Just as the banality and Americanness echoed in all things *government issued* was captured through the extensions of the state into everyday life in the cultural forms of Sunday morning softball and pickup basketball. The state, Sparrow argues, was even behind the scenes forging a new American self—one that might indeed have “invited them to break out.”

Transposing Welfare to Warfare

In the years immediately following 1940 “war displaced its analogue,” welfare, marking a massive sea-change in state power as well as the cultural, social and political forms that produced and apprehended it (chapter 1). The technologies of this new Leviathan, the techniques of state-building as well as the theory, culture, practices and the opportunities to build a modern state had been developing at an unprecedented rate since the late nineteenth century as a response to American urbanization, modernization, a growing polity and the U.S.’ increasingly prominent, though reluctant, place in the international scene. For as Sparrow points out, Wilson remained one of FDR’s great mentors and heroes as well as his inspiration in attempting “to transform the nature of popular sovereignty by creating a pipeline between himself and the people” (32). Moreover, many of the fundamental tools such as the income tax were not new in WWII nor were the key figures that had been present throughout the New Deal in the 1930s. However, as the massive resistance to the New Deal demonstrated, the cultural, social and political forms necessary for apprehending this development of the state were perceived by many as a process of cooptation, corruption, and a challenge to fundamental American liberties: “the U.S. government had to secure mass compliance with a vast extension of state power, and it had to do so not long after political opposition to the Roosevelt administration’s domestic and foreign policies in the late 1930s had brought it to a near standstill” (49).

The impressive development of the modern U.S. state in the first half of the twentieth century consistently confronted a cultural, political and social field that continued to apprehend the modern expansion of the state as a pathology in a democratic context. While figures like Wilson, Dewey, Goodnow and Beard (to name but a few) recognized the fiscal demands of a modern state power and the fundamental role of the state in shaping a democratic American society in response to global transformations, for many in Washington and across the nation such a state was no more than democracy’s perversion. In this sense, the New Deal was the height of a paroxysm of state/culture confrontation that had been in the

making for 50 years, based on the massive development of state technologies and the lack of the social and cultural forms that were necessary to support it. The development of American democracy and the state in the period 1940-1945 was therefore only possible through what Sparrow titles the transposition “of ideology from welfare to warfare” (41).

Establishing the New State

The new wave of warfare statecraft that followed, which is the focus of Sparrow’s book, is a story about how the state was able to overcome the tremendous resistance to the new American leviathan whose outlines had emerged in previous decades, bolstered by an ideology and political culture that pushed it into the everyday lives of Americans. This new state was able to redefine the foundations of democratic legitimacy, sovereignty and citizenship by weaving itself into the very social and cultural fabric of American society. In so doing, it not only made and even naturalized an unprecedented development of the state, but allowed the state to achieve a new level of infrastructural power with relatively little resistance.

The originality of Sparrow’s book resides in the emphasis he places on where and when this state was constructed. First, while his book is decidedly focused on state power, it is not limited to an examination of bureaucracy, elections or some of the staples of the school of American Political Development. Rather, his approach follows the manifestations of the state into everyday cultural forms. Thus, in spite of the focus on the war, his is a history that explains how the state came to structure the cultural and the social, stretching far beyond a Weberian conception of an autonomous state that operates through coercion and a monopoly on legitimate violence. The key to Sparrow’s story is compliance, and this required deep cultural change, which he follows through music, media, clothing, eating habits and other key features of the American quotidian.

Second, where the focus on American state power in the twentieth century has been blinded by an almost obsessive focus on welfare and the New Deal, Sparrow has revealed that the lasting impact of the interwar period welfare state paled in comparison to the lasting and profound impact of the “warfare” state. It is of course noteworthy that Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *Age of Roosevelt* stopped with volume 3 in 1936, never completing the volume on the war years. Moreover, in more recent years the work of William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (1932-1940)* (1963), Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New*

Deal liberalism in Recession and War (1996), and Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (1990) have shared this overwhelming emphasis on welfare as the key force in structuring American politics in the twentieth century. And yet, paradoxically enough, as Sparrow convincingly argues in Chapter 3, the ability to pinpoint welfare as the key site and even problem of American state building was precisely one of the most effective means of “scapegoating the state”—that is, reinforcing the state’s capacity to inspire national unity by arguing that those in power were using it to the wrong ends. In other words, as Sparrow shows, placing welfare as well as its critique at the center of the history of the American state has, in fact, been one of the most effective means of reinforcing state power, not dismantling it.

Sparrow traces this process of building the warfare state through what he calls “four departures from the U.S. longest held political traditions.” First, peacetime draft, he argued, re-forged citizenship marking the emergence of the citizen soldier, which is the focus of chapter 6. As he points out, the ease with which this new recruitment was accepted was remarkable considering its shaky past, revealing “a strikingly high degree of legitimacy.” This new policy reconfigured definitions of masculinity and citizenship, tying one to the other through propaganda and physical experience. Surprisingly (and convincingly) it is the zoot-suit riots that provide insight into this new model citizen. The zoot-suiters, who wore elaborate suits with a wealth of bright and rich fabrics, became the object of derision for soldiers in Los Angeles because their clothes were perceived as “an antiuniform that expressed a young man’s individuality, flair, and freedom at a time when young men were expected to be serving their country through conformity to military political culture” (234). In Sparrow’s account, the riots, which have traditionally been read along racial lines, were in fact part of a cultural battle over a new masculinity bolstered by the moral economy of a new citizen soldier.

The second great departure was that of the war-time alliance, and the end of the isolationism that had hitherto marked much of American politics. This shift designated the opening of a new American state that would ultimately, as Philip Roth also suggested, govern “not only themselves but some two hundred million people in Italy, Austria, Germany, and Japan,” crystallizing a new wave of American statecraft that stretched far beyond its North American boundaries throughout the Cold War and beyond. The support for this war-time alliance was provided by a new mass compliance that was in large part engineered by

“military authorities, social scientists, experts drawn from the worlds of journalism, advertising, public relations, radio, and film—who had their own ideas about how to monitor and manage mass compliance with the war effort” (49). This mix of public and private “experts” produced “an imaginary whose institutional and ideological contours would prove durable” and “make ‘freedom’ and the ‘American way of life’ ideological calling cards for the United States in the Cold War” (49).

The Redefinition of the State-Society Relationship

The third departure, “war finance,” required the reconstitution of the very fiscal foundations of the American state. Through the emergence of war bonds and stamps, a dramatic increase in income tax and price controls, the state embarked on a new notion of fiscal citizenship that Sparrow explores in Chapter 4. Here, he traces the process whereby “patriotism was fused with a sense of entitlement to an American standard of living—underwritten by government-managed economic growth” (121), which proved durable even beyond the decline in bond purchases and growing taxpayer resentment following the war. Similarly, the concretization of a mixed economy meant a new public-private partnership that sustained the economic foundations of the American leviathan. By 1945, these departures quite simply marked the redefinition of the state-society relationship, a shift from regulation (existent since the eighteenth century, as recent scholarship shows) and welfare (championed by the New Deal) to a warfare state in which “the scope and nature” of the state’s authority was vastly extended.

Through these techniques the state was able to redefine its relationship to almost all sectors of society and rebuild a social and cultural polity. In this sense, Sparrow’s argument is penetrating and original precisely because it does not oppose the state and statecraft, including bureaucracy and a vastly expanded administrative power, to democracy. If anything, Sparrow places the development of a deep tentacular state at the heart of the history of American democracy. For this state was profoundly democratic. Sparrow’s surprising and well-documented role of figures like Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax (great authorities of American folk music) who were essential to staging “a broader ‘cultural strategy,’... that would democratize the nation’s wartime morale”(39), is some of the strongest evidence of this democratizing tendency within the new leviathan.

In the construction of this massive democratic leviathan, the essential question became: how was the relationship between a government that was expanding in nature and scope and its citizens recast such that it remained a legitimate democratic bond—and not a pathological process of either social alienation (in which society would be too divorced from a despotic authoritarian state, which in turn would have to rely largely on coercion) or political slavery (in which the state were only a simple vessel for communicating dominant social interests). Sparrow demonstrates that the construction of the post-war democratic society captured by Roth was the product of the massive development of state power through compliance and not the state’s dismissal. In so doing, he explores a key moment in the history of one of the most potent examples of modern statecraft: the American state.

These fundamental transformations of the American state served not only to redefine American politics, but they also provide us with an extremely convincing story on the construction of the state more broadly. In an Op-ed column of the *Herald Tribune*, David Brooks recently wrote an article entitled “America is Europe.” He opened the article stating: “We Americans cherish our myths. One myth is that there is more social mobility in the United States than in Europe. That’s false. Another myth is that the government is smaller here than in Europe. That’s largely false too.”³ Apparently, the idea that the American state is a powerful robust state model, and not simply a shadow of its older Jacobin or Prussian brother, has hit the mainstream. With this book, Sparrow has provided an important step in moving beyond this assertion. Moreover, the originality and depth of Sparrow’s approach suggests that in spite of those who have followed the call to “bring the state back in” and American Political Development, we still have miles to go before we may truly appreciate the various paths of the history of the American democratic state and generate an accurate understanding of its place in the process of modern state-building.

Further reading

Thomas Grillot & Pauline Peretz, « The American State: Power Obscured. An Interview with William Novak & James Sparrow », *Books & Ideas*, 15 November 2011. <http://www.booksandideas.net/The-American-State-Power-Obscured.htm>

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³ Herald Tribune—The Global Edition of the New York Times, Saturday-Sunday, February 25-26, 2012, p 9. For a scholarly, historical statement of this thesis, see William Novak, “The Myth of the Weak American State.” *The American Historical Review*, 113: 752–772, June 2008.