
Review Essay

Bold Relief

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Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy. *Edwin Amenta.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

In *Bold Relief*, Edwin Amenta sets aside the conventional wisdom that the American welfare state was destined to be backward. He asks what might have been had the New Deal system of jobs provision and relief survived World War II. To do this he rejects the current view of the 1930s, as a time when a piecemeal system of social insurance emerged that set the stage for the future, and considers what policymakers of the 1930s envisioned. The title of the book, *Bold Relief*, captures the system they put into place. That system transformed the United States from a social insurance laggard into the world's leader. The two pillars were a conventional cash aid program and an aggressive public employment program to provide jobs for those who were disappointed by the private sector.

In retrospect, analysts describe the experiment in *Bold Relief* as a temporary solution to the widespread unemployment created by the depression. In the end, that is what it was. The jobs program was dismantled by the end of the war, leaving only a meager cash aid program. But the architects of the system did not see it as a temporary expedient, and if it had survived, as planned, America might today have the most ambitious public program to combat unemployment of any nation in the world. Indeed, as a consequence of the cash assistance and public jobs programs, by the end of the 1930s the United States was spending more on relief than any other nation.

Amenta seeks to explain why that system failed to flourish, and in the

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process, to explain why America reverted to the status of social insurance laggard after the war. He does this by making a path dependence argument about how the jobs programs and income subsidies of the 1930s were decimated, and how a mixed bag of incoherent and poorly funded programs was left. In the 1930s, Congress had passed a coherent and ambitious program. But Congress chipped away at that program during the 1940s. What was it about American political institutions that made it so easy for Congress to disassemble the social protections created in the 1930s? In the process of answering this question, Amenta addresses the enduring and more general causes of the weakness of the American welfare state.

Like his historical bombshell, about the way things might have been, Amenta's theory is spelled out in the subtitle of the book: *Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy*. Amenta describes his theory as a synthesis of institutional and neo-Marxist theories, but it is really much more than that. Amenta rewrites both theories, and then shows that it takes both to account for America's weak welfare state.

Amenta thus questions institutionalists' fixation on federalism, arguing that it was not federalism but undemocratic political institutions that killed the social programs of the 1930s. He shows that in half of the 48 states large segments of the population were excluded from political participation. Southern states used various devices to exclude blacks from the voting booth and thus blacks could not express their support for redistributive programs. Northern and Midwestern states used patronage systems that shut many groups out of politics. Moreover, patronage systems depended on particularism in the distribution of public goods, and thus the system itself was incompatible with universal social insurance programs.

In undemocratic states, legislatures did not take full advantage of federal funding and did not create good pilot programs under federal initiatives. In fact, many of the very same states fail to take full advantage of federal programs today. Undemocratic states also sent representatives to Washington, DC, who opposed expansion of federal work and relief programs.

Amenta questions the neo-Marxist model of politics as well, and in particular the contention that social insurance can only flourish under Social Democratic parties. Here he tries heroically to sound a note of optimism. America's social welfare state could come to resemble Denmark's if, as in the 1930s, reformers can line all of their ducks up in a row. Reformers of the 1930s were able to pass the most sweeping set of social insurance measures ever passed, anywhere. But this can only happen in a country that lacks a Social Democratic party, when all other factors favor it. When the President has a strong program of reform. When she has not only a party majority in Congress but also a majority that favors social insurance.

And when policy elites and professionals come together, as did the Brains Trust, behind an expansion of the social welfare state.

While Amenta's institutional and political arguments build on Weber and Marx respectively, his method is pure Durkheim. He employs every imaginable kind of comparison to test his theory. He makes one principal over-time comparison at the level of federal policy, between the period in the mid-1930s when Roosevelt successfully pushed through a series of reforms and six contiguous periods in which the state did little, or nothing, or actually reversed the gains of the 1930s. Using a soft version of Boolean truth tables, Amenta shows that the institutional and political factors he privileges explain the rise of Bold Relief as well as its decline. Amenta then makes a series of comparisons at the level of state policy to show that nondemocratic states failed to make use of federal programs and sent conservatives to Washington. Finally, he compares the United States to Britain, with the goal of showing that the United States might not have turned back in the 1940s had circumstances been different—in particular had they been the circumstances found in Britain. Taken together, these comparisons make a compelling case for Amenta's theory of institutional politics.

Two ideas are woven through the story Edwin Amenta tells in *Bold Relief*. One is that institutional factors shape policy outcomes by determining who will be involved in which decisions; apart from a brief period in the 1930s, American institutions have worked against the emergence of a coalition to support a wide and dense security net. The other is that while key moments in history can set a country on one path or another, the path not taken can nonetheless be taken later. This second insight is the basis of Amenta's explanation of how the Bold Relief program of the 1930s could be reversed in the 1940s, and it is the basis of his belief that such a program could emerge again.

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