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ANOTHER PROGRESSIVE ERA?

Daniel T. Rodgers

Isser Woloch, *The Postwar Moment: Progressive Forces in Britain, France, and the United States after World War II*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. xxii + 515 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$40.00.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a burst of reform aspirations arose across the globe. Pent-up progressive ambitions of the interwar years erupted into the postwar era, fueled by experiences of war mobilization and wartime hardship. A human rights agenda began to crystalize around the war's atrocities. Communism's promise of a revolutionary break with capitalism had never seemed brighter. The end of empires, the hollow promise that World War I's victors had raised in 1919, now seemed finally within reach. Whatever frame it took, conviction that the world should not be allowed to slide back into its earlier structures of power and politics shaped the idea of the "postwar."

In his most recent book, the Columbia University historian Isser Woloch turns his attention from the era of the French Revolution, on which most of his career has been focused, to a much later moment of disruption. *The Postwar Moment* does not survey the entire postwar terrain, as Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (2005) did for Europe more than a decade ago.¹ It undertakes, more modestly, to track the achievements and aspirations of the non-Marxist Left in the United States, France, and Britain during the Second World War and the war's immediate aftermath.

In France, Woloch pays closest attention to the *mouvement républicain populaire* (MRP), a social-Catholic political movement that emerged out of the anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy Resistance into brief but powerful political influence after 1945. In Britain, Woloch focuses on the agenda and achievements of the Labour governments of 1945–51. In the United States, his focus is on the Democratic Party and the CIO. In each of these three cases, the window of progressive possibility differed. The postwar progressive moment was shortest in France. In the parliamentary elections held in the first flush of liberation in the fall of 1945, a tripartite coalition of MRP progressives, non-Marxist socialists, and communists won an overwhelming majority, promising to set France on a new social-economic footing for the future. That alliance framed the Fourth Republic's constitution and launched an ambitious program of economic and

social reforms, but then fell apart in a cascade of workers' strikes in the fall of 1947. The postwar "moment" lasted longer in Britain, from the Labour Party's stunning electoral victory in 1945 through the Conservatives' return to power in 1951. Set within this context, the Truman administration from 1945 to 1952 should be not be seen simply as the final unraveling of FDR's New Deal, Woloch urges, but as part of a transnational moment of progressive promise worth understanding on its own.

The lasting achievements of the postwar progressive coalitions varied across the three nations. They were weakest in France. Nationalization of coal, electricity, and gas production; the airlines; and the largest insurance companies and banks had already been undertaken by De Gaulle's provisional government under pressure from the Left before the tripartite government came into office. Women's suffrage was the result of De Gaulle's decree. During the tripartite government's two years in power, however, it finalized a major extension and coordination of France's late-1920s social insurance provisions. The first steps in an ambitious program of housing construction were undertaken. Institutions for national economic planning were inaugurated. But popular unrest over wages and price inflation, the wildfire spread of strikes, and communist opposition to the terms of U.S. economic assistance broke the alliance apart before more could be accomplished.

Progressives' most dramatic leap forward took place in Britain. The Labour Party had been on the margins of British politics before World War II. Its two brief periods in office in the 1920s had accomplished little. But now in the wake of the war, Labour majorities seized the mandate of their overwhelming electoral victory in 1945 to radically remake British economic and social policy. They pushed through the nationalization of coal, gas, electricity, railroads, and steel manufacture. They instituted the Beveridge Report's recommendations to consolidate pre-war social insurance provisions into a comprehensive net of economic safeguards. Hospitals and much of private medical practice were swept into the new fee-free, tax-supported National Health Service. Ambitious public housing schemes were inaugurated. Secondary education was expanded. The government formally adopted planning for full employment. None of these proposals were new; they had circulated through all the Atlantic economies in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. But the British Labourites in the late 1940s were the first to combine them into the pattern we now recognize as the modern welfare state.

Although the achievements of U.S. progressives in the late 1940s and early 1950s fell far short of their British counterparts', Woloch insists that they should not be dismissed. Wartime visions of economic planning were handed on to a new, peacetime council of economic advisers. An ambitious program of publicly financed housing construction was adopted. Much of the rest of Truman's Fair Deal went down to defeat in crippling intra-party disputes

over race and rights and in the domestic political fallout from the Cold War. The administration's failure to muster enough votes to sustain Truman's veto of the Taft-Hartley Act was a major defeat. But it would be a mistake to assume that progressive ambitions were abandoned in the American postwar moment. There was no U-turn, Woloch insists. The Full Employment Bill of 1945, with its promise of a "right to useful, remunerative, regular, and full-time employment" was as bold as anything the British Labour Party put forward. In Congress, the progressives' renewed drive for compulsory national health insurance legislation was serious enough to galvanize a frightened medical establishment into vigorous counter-action.

Woloch is at his best in laying out the parallels between these three national variations on postwar progressive aspirations. In every case, progressive governments took for granted that the task of managing the transition from war-time to peace-time economies—amid the intense pressure of acute shortages, spiraling price inflation, wage demands, and angry labor protest—was too important to be left to private market forces. Extension of labor rights and institutions of labor-management adjustment and co-determination were a common progressive project. Extension and rationalization of the social insurance systems of the pre-war years were on every progressive coalition's agenda. Equalizing chances for education, decent housing, health care, and employment was a common goal. And everywhere these ambitions met common forms of resistance. Doctors lobbied no less hard in Britain against the institution of the National Health Service than they lobbied against the Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill for national health insurance in the U.S. Business lobbies put up fierce resistance to every legislative threat to their right to manage as they saw fit. The communist Left chafed at the modesty of their progressive allies' ambitions.

If the ensuing battles produced an array of mixed and divergent outcomes, in their aspirations, Woloch argues, the progressive projects were everywhere closely the same. Lay three of the founding documents of the postwar progressive moment alongside each other—the "Common Program" that circulated secretly through Resistance circles in France in early 1944; the British Labour Party's manifesto for the 1945 election, *Let Us Face the Future*; and the CIO Political Action Committee's "People's Program for 1944"—and the resemblances are powerful. "So close in time, so similar in content, so resonant with comparable aspirations" for equity and social justice, Woloch writes of them (p. 405). It is a point that U.S. historians could fruitfully absorb.

Yet just at this juncture, Woloch's method of analysis begins to disappoint. *The Postwar Moment* begins with vignettes of three unheralded individuals who, in the face of the war's terrors and uncertainties, dreamed of a more socially just and equitable future. After these opening cameos, however, rank-and-file figures in the progressive cause drop out of the Woloch's book. In place of

a history of interlaced ambitions, Woloch gives us separately encapsulated accounts of high politics and policy formation in each of his three chosen nations. For those who know only the U.S. dimensions of this history, there is much to be learned from Woloch's knowledgeable and carefully crafted synopses. They help make clear why American progressives in the Truman years thought they were riding the wave of the world's future, not struggling merely to redeem a few pieces of the New Deal's unrealized promises or to keep the rest from being devoured by their opponents. But the routes to this common agenda and the personal and institutional connections that sustained it are not within the scope of Woloch's inquiry.

Only rarely does *The Postwar Moment* stop to note the ways in which progressives viewed their counterparts elsewhere. The role of the international socialist movement in shaping the progressive agenda of the 1940s lies unexplored. The dynamics of social policy imitation are bracketed. The New Deal's reverberations had been global, as Kiran Klaus Patel has recently underscored.² The analyses of figures such as Keynes and Beveridge had powerful transnational influence. The new-model welfare states that were put together after the Second World War throughout Europe (and, albeit in a different key, in the U.S. as well) were shaped by a continuous process of imitation, modification, and mutual watchfulness. Movements toward new sorts of state-economic management were developed in the same transnational context. Processes of social learning and, at the same time, conscious desire for national differentiation vied with each other everywhere.

Rather than move in these directions, Woloch's *The Postwar Moment* follows a different scheme. Its chapters move down parallel tracks that deal, one by one, with events in France, Britain, and the U.S. The result presses home cross-national similarity, but it leaves unexplored the webs of intersections that brought those similarities into being. *The Postwar Moment* is not an example of interconnected histories; it is history by juxtaposition.

One should not sell this short. Juxtapositions are the foundation blocks of comparative history. They form the bases from which explanations for both divergence and similarity are forged. The comparative questions around which such a book might be written shimmer just beneath Woloch's parallel narratives. Why these three different results despite the threads of common aspiration between them? What accounts for the great leap forward in socially progressive politics in Britain compared to progressives' much more difficult struggle in the U.S. and the abrupt detour into Gaullism in France? In his brief conclusion, Woloch acknowledges these questions, but to most of them his readers must bring their own answers.

As a start, a comparativist might underscore four axes of divergence. One would emphasize the legacies of the past. By its very nature reform is episodic. Over time it consumes its own energies; its very successes mobilize the forces

organized to blunt or undo it. The New Deal had been American progressives' breakthrough moment at a time when progressive forces in Britain and France were largely stalemated. But by 1945, when a new wave of progressive ambitions broke over these three nations, the New Deal was no longer young. Its critics had had more time to organize; its own internal alliances were strained. It had no clean slate on which to draw its vision of the future. The British Labour Party, by contrast, burst onto the scene in 1945 with the all force of newness the New Dealers had possessed in 1933. It promised a sharp break from the past that Truman-era progressives could no longer tap. Policy measures that had been far beyond reach in prewar Britain—nationalization of primary industries, nationalization of hospital care and doctors' services, and full employment planning—suddenly became achievable in the ruptures the war had opened.

Divergent wartime experiences similarly pushed toward different outcomes. In Britain, the war had brought not only a sense of common suffering that was unmatched in the U.S., where war-time economic and social strains had been far less acute. In addition, in Britain the war gave the state, for a moment, unprecedented prestige. State-directed mobilization of the economy for the public good: if this could win the war, could it not be brought to bear to mitigate the cruelty of a boom and bust economic system? Could a state devoted to the common welfare not bring health and medical services in peacetime to all Britons as a right of citizenship? In a different key, these questions arose out of the Americans' war experience as well. The generous benefits in health, education, and housing that were extended to war veterans after 1945 drew from the same spirit that inspired the postwar British welfare state. But in Britain, where the war's sacrifices had been so broadly felt, every civilian might be plausibly cast as a war veteran. In the more sheltered United States, that argument was a far harder to make. In France, the wartime experience had been yet different. Military and political failure was its overwhelming event. Putting the nation back on a more secure footing of constitutional law and public confidence was an overriding issue after 1945. It is no wonder that the French version of the post-war social welfare state was to such an extent facilitated by a figure who wrapped himself not in the cause of progressive politics but the cloak of the nation itself, Charles De Gaulle.

Important differences in political and party configurations ran beneath the three nations' post-war similarities as well. The Communist Party was vastly more important in postwar French politics than in the U.S. or Britain. French communists had played a leading part in the war-time Resistance. In a parliamentary delegation evenly split between communists, socialists, and MRP representatives, the Communists formed a centrally important part of the progressive coalition of 1945. When their partners in *tripartisme* expelled the Communists in 1947, the popular foundations for a progressive majority

collapsed. The Communist Party was strong in the U.S. as well, Woloch notes, not in electoral politics but within critically important sectors of the labor movement and the intelligentsia. As in France, the communist-sympathetic Left was outmaneuvered by its critics, but not before American anti-communist progressives had expended a great deal of their political energy in the conflict or before conservatives had seized the chance to tar the entire progressive agenda as a tool of foreign subversion. Only in Britain did a more unified Left persist through the postwar moment.

Finally, in each country, the war experience brought different issues into salience. In France, the overwhelming event was the bitterness of surrender and collaboration. It was into this experience that de Gaulle would move with his project to restore the nation's glory. In Britain, the sharpest domestic experience of the war was the pain of material suffering. Where shortages of every sort had upended domestic life, nothing could be higher on the progressive agenda than the promise of a peace with jobs, food, housing, health, and insurance against the hazards of life for all. In the U.S., although it took time for this awareness to take hold, the most unnerving experience of the war was not the capacity of the economy. As American farms and businesses began to pour out an astonishing stream of war goods, the instabilities of capitalism that had been revealed in 1929-33 lapsed into a distant memory. A more equitable distribution of the capitalist economy's resources was needed, but not its fundamental restructuring. The more unnerving lesson from the war was different: a new reckoning among American progressives with the fact that the racist furies that had been unleashed in Hitler's Germany were not alien but were starkly present at home.

Racial justice had played a secondary part in the New Deal agenda, though the strength of the white Southern wing of the Democratic Party, as Ira Katznelson has recently underscored, made it a battle too futile to for racial progressives to win.³ But in the war's aftermath, racial justice moved with altogether new force onto the progressive agenda. Truman expended an important part of his political capital on a civil rights platform. The CIO, despite the long history of white privilege in the labor movement, threw its weight behind a commitment to racial justice. The President's Committee on Civil Rights' *To Secure These Rights* was, in this sense, the American counterpart to the British Labour Party's *Let Us Face the Future*. Most of the late 1940s initiatives on civil rights, to be sure, were stymied. Truman's bans on racial discrimination in the armed forces and the federal workforce were largely evaded; the new public housing developments incorporated racial apartheid into their core mission. But the frustration of that agenda does not alter the comparative contrast. In France and Britain, issues of racial justice erupted in the postwar moment as well, as their empires were buffeted by struggles for independence. But in France in the immediate aftermath of 1945, the integrity of the nation hung

most urgently in the balance. In Britain, the most urgent demands were economic. In the U.S., the questions the war made newly urgent were questions of rights, race, and justice at home. The conflict put them centrally onto American progressive agenda, where they would stay alongside the progressives' older economic agenda into the present.

Woloch's brief concluding gestures toward comparisons do not do justice to questions of this sort. His initial decision to tell the history of the postwar progressive moment through juxtaposed national narratives overwhelms the transnational and comparative histories that lie, implicitly, beneath them. But in the end, neither interconnections nor comparisons may be the main point of Woloch's project. The most important contribution of *The Postwar Moment* is its demonstration that across three markedly different postwar nations a more equitable economy and social system suddenly seemed to lie within progressives' reach.

Although few of the details in Woloch's U.S.-focused chapters will surprise specialists in mid-twentieth century U.S. history, by framing these years within a theme of hope, his account cuts in important ways against the pessimism that pervades most progressive histories of post-war U.S. politics. The post-war years were years of frustration for many American New Dealers and progressives, when the coalition that had made the New Deal began to consume itself. They were years haunted by fear, both external and internal. Historians have grown accustomed to reading late 1940s progressive politics as the New Deal's last, sadly diminished act. But contemporaries did not know what the future held in store for them. If they lived with acute new fears, they also lived with hope. "Was that only possible which came to pass?" Woloch asks, quoting James Joyce (p. 6). Despite the limitations of its design, *The Postwar Moment* leaves us with that critically important question.

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1. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (2005)
2. Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (2016).
3. Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (2013).