AMERICAS


Michael Szalay’s New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State is that rare event in scholarly publishing—a genuinely important book. A work of great ambition and innovation, it is the most significant study of the literature of the American Thirties to have been published in years. But its significance extends still further than even this high praise suggests. Investigating the previously unnoticed affiliation between the governmental methods of the welfare state and the literary strategies that accompanied its rise, Szalay offers a striking revision of the history of modernism and, more broadly still, of the whole course of twentieth-century American cultural history.

At the heart of Szalay's innovation lies his emphasis on the significance of the New Deal. Literary scholars have long been fascinated with the Thirties as the “red decade,” an unusual moment when the greater part of the American intelligentsia saw itself on the left end of the political spectrum. Taking those often heated avowals for granted, literary historians have spent much of their effort parsing the ideological disputes of the era and tracing literary products back to the political convictions of their authors. Since few writers were as enthusiastic about the Roosevelt administration as they were about Trotsky, or Stalin, or the Popular Front, the result has been a picture of the Thirties to which the New Deal becomes a strangely trivial event.
By Szalay’s account this is deeply mistaken. For better or worse, the New Deal was the crucial force in the cultural life of the era. As a political phenomenon alone, the New Deal was simply the defining event of the period—a profound transformation that affected far more people than any faction of the left ever touched. But it is in its less evident material and ideological importance that the New Deal matters most to Szalay. Materially, the New Deal literally underwrote cultural production in the Thirties, paying the salaries of thousands of writers and giving rise in the process to a significant new understanding of aesthetic labor. Ideologically, the welfare state created by the New Deal stood at the center of a deep transformation in the most basic ideas of government and society. Like most such shifts, this transformation was poorly understood at the time. Nevertheless, New Deal Modernism shows that a subterranean concern about the role of the welfare state lay at the very core of the era’s most important cultural innovations.

That concern turned especially around the problem of security. As Szalay shows, no idea was more important to the New Deal, or to the era’s artists and thinkers. Objecting less to the injustices of capitalism than to its terrible unpredictability, New Deal liberals sought above all for ways to make the market less hazardous, an effort that culminated in the centerpiece of the Roosevelt reforms—Social Security. In Szalay’s view, social insurance succeeded at what most New Deal experiments sought to achieve; by aggregating individual lives into collective groups it compensated for the dangers of the market. In doing so, however, it also fostered a new vision of the state (as an insurer) and a new understanding of society (as a statistically defined population) that would have far-reaching political and intellectual consequences.

New Deal Modernism brilliantly traces those consequences in a vast range of texts and issues. Szalay shows that many of the famed literary disputes of the era hinged on the need to imagine a secure and meaningful place for cultural labor, an effort that resulted in a new vision of the artist as salaried craftsman and, consequently, a new image of aesthetic work as "performance." For this striking genealogy of our contemporary aesthetic shibboleths alone, Szalay’s work would be invaluable. But New Deal Modernism goes on to discover the influence of the welfare state in a host of locations—in, for example, the era’s obsessive interest in tales of insurance; in its profound concern over the problem of intentionality (the very idea of which social insurance rendered problematic);
and in its revisions of the nature of the family and of racial groups (both of which the welfare state significantly redefined). Along the way, Szalay offers acute readings of a whole crew of writers: Frost, Stevens, Stein, Hemingway, Wright, Steinbeck, and Cain, to mention only the most prominent. This is bold and brilliant work. If there is any justice, New Deal Modernism will be a defining work in its field for many years to come.

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Laura Hapke’s Labor’s Text is an impressive, ambitious, and extremely informative history of the representation of workers in American fiction, beginning in the 1840s and continuing through the 1990s. Because of this sweeping scope, Hapke has had to make a few compromises, such as mentioning a number of works only in passing. But this approach allows her to call attention to a remarkable range of works, many of which are relatively unknown. Indeed, Labor’s Text is, among other things, a work of historical recovery that reminds readers of the existence of a number of worker-oriented texts that have been largely forgotten. At the same time, Hapke discusses a number of well-known works, including those by canonical writers, such as Theodore Dreiser and John Steinbeck, who are sympathetic to the plight of workers. In general, however, Hapke’s book is striking for the fact that it discusses so few canonical texts—for the very good reason that canonical American literature has largely ignored workers in its presentation of a national cultural identity. As a result, Hapke’s history, though rich in examples of the representation of workers, is not a happy one. Running throughout the text are reminders not only of the absence of workers in mainstream American fiction, but of the general failure of writers who do represent workers to transcend the individualist ideology of America and to make positive contributions to the development of an effective American working-class consciousness.