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Philip Nord, *France's New Deal from the Thirties to the Postwar Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. xi + 474 pp. Notes and index. \$39.50 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0691-14297-5.

Review Essay by Laura Lee Downs, CRH-EHESS

I read Philip Nord's wonderful new book while traveling from Paris to Bordeaux on the southwestern TGV line, part of the national network of high-speed trains whose very existence is unthinkable without the profound transformations—political, cultural and economic—that *France's New Deal* recounts with such intelligence, nuance, and, where appropriate (and it often is), great wit. Nord's narrative is marked by a deep sense of the ironies in how things sometimes worked out across the late prewar, wartime and postwar years of the mid-twentieth century. These years are dense with transformations, upheavals, and conflicts, both domestic and international, all of which have a vital role to play in the story Philip Nord has to tell. It is a story about the nation's mid-century renaissance: a remarkable bout of institutional creativity that, following hard on the heels of war, occupation, and four years of authoritarian rule, endowed France with an ample welfare state and a new kind of economic order; *dirigiste*, to be sure, but also based on the active participation of the relevant social partners (trade unions, consumers, family associations, employer groups, etc.). Over the next thirty years the French economy would grow at a spectacular rate, thanks in large measure to those very transformations in the administrative state wrought at the Liberation. At the same time, the benefits of France's new social state would spread to ever-wider swathes of the population and in ever-more comprehensive forms, achieving by the early 1970s an enviable reconciliation of economic growth with broad social protection.

The architects of France's spectacularly successful "New Deal" completed their work with a systematic overhaul of cultural policy, a realm in which, Nord tells us, the Third Republic had been "laissez-faire to the point of negligence" (p. 14). It was not to be so in the brave new world of postwar France, where cultural renewal was to take its place proudly alongside political, economic, and social reconstruction in an ambitious program that sought to energize the country at all levels and in all registers. Before the last German soldiers had even quit French soil, then, the nascent institutions of economic planning and social welfare found themselves flanked by a series of bold initiatives in theatre, cinema, and radio, intended to place "the best that has been thought and said" within reach of a larger public, both provincial and Parisian.[1] France's political, economic, and social renovation was thus to be seconded by a broad cultural renaissance, one that emphasized quality productions, whether traditional classics or modern and experimental, as an alternative to the vulgar and soul-deadening impact of commercial cultural production. This new "culture state" was every bit as central to the nation's larger reconstruction, Nord argues persuasively, and he backs his claim with a truly original *démarche* in which the history and evolution of the three pillars of France's mid-century renaissance—economic planning, social welfare, and cultural policy, understood as three distinct yet related registers on which national France's renewal was to be achieved—are placed on an equal plane and examined alongside one another.

But precisely what forces triumphed in 1944-45, and what is the nature of the "revolution" they wrought? After all, the call for economic planning, social protection, and cultural renewal had come not only from the left but also from various quarters on the right in 1930s France. Moreover, Vichy itself had taken on board many of these demands, issuing its own economic plans, experimenting with various social protection schemes (generally aimed at legitimate, French families while

excluding all others) and launching numerous programs of popular culture that emphasized youth, fitness, and the cultivation of new elites. So whose vision ultimately prevailed at the Liberation? Which concepts of economic growth, social welfare, and cultural uplift actually fueled the reconstructive projects of 1944–45? In a lucid and admirably brief introductory chapter, Nord considers briefly three possible answers to this question, each of which is drawn from the three distinct narratives that organize the growing literature on this fascinating period: 1) the story of a left-wing revolution betrayed in favor of a restoration of order; 2) the story of rampant Americanization; 3) the story of France’s participation in Europe’s broader “social democratic moment” via the realization of two, interconnected projects dear to the prewar left: economic planning and the development of a full-blown welfare state. He then goes on to explain that the complex realities of this period demand that historians accept that each of these narratives captures some truth about developments across this tumultuous period without ever quite seizing hold of that which—with sixty-plus years of hindsight—seems most essential. For if the postwar period was indeed a “state-building moment,” it did not fall into the familiar Jacobin, Colbertiste or Bonapartist moulds. Rather, Nord argues, the post-1944 project was something altogether more original. Though in part the fruit of social democratic aspiration, “other forces were at work as well whose identifying characteristics remain to be sorted out” (p. 22).

It is to the identification of those “other forces” and to the careful evaluation of their respective contributions in shaping France’s postwar institutional and cultural reconstruction that Nord dedicates the 350-plus pages of his rich, insightful, and passionate book. Resolutely non-teleological, ever attentive to the significance of the multiple roads not taken, Nord first takes his reader back in time to the early 1930s—where the protean and multiform “other forces,” including (most notably) a range of politically unaffiliated technocrats and lay Catholics, began to take shape—before leading her across the apparent ruptures of 1940 and 1944 in order to lay bare all that was not-so-new in the radical overhaul that France’s administrative state received at the Liberation.

*France’s New Deal* is thus a meditation on the plural origins of what we like to call today the “French model.” Part concerted economy, part technocracy, part parental welfare state, the construction of this model can only be understood, Nord convinces us, by paying attention to the political alignments, “conjunctural rather than permanent,” that made it all possible. Hence the importance of pursuing the analysis across the conventional divides of 1940 and 1944. This, in turn, demands that we follow most attentively the often crooked paths by which a number of actors, large and small, came to play their parts in the larger effort to refashion the administrative state in 1944–45.

We are already familiar with some of these actors—the left-wing and social democratic resistance, the Communist Party, the various strains of Christian democratic resistance, de Gaulle and (later) the Gaullists. Nord asks that we also turn our eyes to a group he calls the 1930s nonconformists—technocrats of various stripes and heterodox (though not necessarily left-wing) lay Catholics who, in the 1930s, had already embarked (at least in their minds) upon various projects of social and economic reform; groups such as X-Crise, *l’Ordre nouveau*, Catholic Action in its many consumer-specific guises (JOC, JEC, JAC), the group gathered around *Esprit*, etc.[2] Once ranged alongside the Gaullists in Liberation-era France, these people would constitute a group of “not-so-Left” architects obsessed with the modernization of an archaic, rural, and overly-individualistic France. Their signal contributions to the design of the post-1945 state would include sufficient old timber recuperated from late-Third Republican and Vichy initiatives that the term “revolution” is, quite simply, an inadequate, if not misleading way to characterize the more complex work of reconstruction these men would undertake.

It is worth noting that their number included many who, like François Mitterrand, moved across the political chessboard (itself a very mobile landscape in these years) from extreme right (member of the *Volontaires nationaux du mouvement Croix de feu*, in the case of Mitterrand) to Pétainist loyalism before moving on, in 1942–3 (and sometimes 1944) into one strand or another of the Resistance. In other words, it was the very mobility of the political landscape in late 1930s to mid-1940s France that allowed for the rapid recycling of former vichyites into postwar government service, some of whom would arrive re-branded as leftists. As these men (and one or two women) moved from

Pétainism to some kind of resistance and then into the wide-open world of 1944–45, they carried with them a pastiche of ideas regarding the obsolete nature of faith in free markets alone and the need for some kind of state direction via a long-term economic plan (already an article of faith among numerous 1930s nonconformists); the centrality of political and cultural regeneration to France’s long-term well-being; and the importance of training elites (*chefs*) capable of realizing the requisite transformations at all levels of society. On these three points, the Liberation’s “not-so-left” actors were able to reach a broad consensus with a social democratic left that was itself convinced not only of the bankruptcy of free-market ideas but also of the vital importance of economic planning and political and cultural regeneration via a young elite already tested by the fires of resistance. The social democratic left thus agreed on a certain number of deep-structural points with its Gaullist, technocratic, and catholic action counterparts: the era of free market was long gone, the economy needed strong and well-informed direction, French society needed both solidarity and healthy, reliable leaders. These are ideas, Nord reminds us, that owe as much to Vichy-era corporatism as to postwar social democratic idealism. France’s New Deal was thus haunted at every turn by personnel and by various policy initiatives floated during the brief period of Pétain’s rule.

A single review cannot possibly do justice to the richness and complexity of Nord’s masterful analysis, which will, I believe, shape future literature on the subject. Let me therefore confine my remaining remarks to two areas that I found particularly intriguing: First, Nord’s observation that many of the postwar state’s architects emerged from Catholic, and especially Catholic scout networks; and second, the British comparison which, though rarely invoked, manages nonetheless to cast its discreet shadow across the narrative.

*Les Catholiques d’abord.* One of the most original and intriguing dimensions of Philip Nord’s analysis lies in the systematic attention he gives to the different kinds of Catholic networks, already active on the margins of the Third Republic, that sprang into action in the propitious circumstances of Vichy. Catholic scouts play an especially preponderant role in Nord’s story, and this takes us back to the question of cultural policy during the Third Republic. The Third Republic was not so much *laissez-faire* in this realm as inclined to delegate extra-curricular educational and cultural activities to civil-society groups, Catholic parishes included. Since the secularization of public education in the early 1880s, Catholics had shown themselves to be active educators on all fronts, formal as well as *périscolaire*, and highly innovative pedagogues in the host of institutions (*patronages, colonies de vacances* and, later, scout troops) that proliferated in the realm of children’s leisure at the turn of the twentieth century. But Catholics also felt themselves an embattled minority in the militantly *laïque* Republic, which meant that socio-educative institutions of child and youth leisure were also foyers of solidarity for preparing young Christian militants. The *nébuleuse* of Catholic activists, including Emmanuel Mounier’s *Esprit* and a variegated throng of social Catholics on both Left and Right, would only continue to grow after World War One, ramifying rapidly through the late 1920s and 1930s via the creation of reform-minded youth groups some of which, like the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*, were quite militant. Throughout Nord’s book, we are constantly reminded that one or another of the Liberation’s key actors had passed through the Catholic Scouts, *Jeune France*, or the *Chantiers de la Jeunesse*. Moreover, we see precisely how the values preached by these movements—teamwork, leadership, sports, and outdoor living—marked not only the adult careers of a François Bloch-Lainé or a Henri Dhavernas, but left their imprint on the Liberation-era institutions that they helped to build. One of the signal contributions of Nord’s analysis, then, lies in the way that he suggests—quite plausibly—that for many such “militants of the spirit” service under Vichy, followed by participation in one kind of Resistance network or another, provided a way into government service that, for practicing Catholics, had been largely blocked for the past seventy years. Vichy and the early Fourth Republic thus constitute together the moment when Catholics found themselves gradually integrated into the state after their long exile in the desert.

I would like to conclude with a few remarks about the British comparison, which, while never developed, hovers suggestively around the edges of this splendid book. In truth, I was surprised not to see cited (so far as I could tell) Douglas Ashford’s now-classic study of *The Emergence of the Welfare States*.<sup>[3]</sup> Surprised because Ashford’s main argument seems so in tune with Nord’s conclusions regarding the “consensual,” and therefore more durable, nature of the French welfare

state when compared with its British and American counterparts (p. 382). Ashford thus maintains that French welfare institutions, though less well-funded than their British or American equivalents in the pre-1945 era were nonetheless far more harmoniously integrated into the larger political process, thanks to the participation of various social partners (trade unions, family associations) in managing welfare and social assistance. Indeed, claims Ashford, from the early Third Republic on, the French “built political tensions into the welfare system” as a means of increasing worker awareness of inequality and the importance of social solidarity.[4] In 1944-45, these tensions would find expression in the division of welfare ministries between the Communists (who got Labor) and the Christian democrats (who got Health and Population, which were blended into a single ministry in 1945).

The longstanding tendency for French social protection to be encompassed in the larger development of an expanding concept of the state may well explain some of the continuities Nord identifies across the late Third Republic, Vichy, and the early Fourth Republic, continuities that clearly shaped the perhaps not-so-new deal that arose in the Liberation and early postwar periods. The tendency to place social assistance within the ambit of an expansive state has meant that such assistance in France is understood to be a citizen right, rather than being more narrowly associated with poverty and urban misery, as is the case in Great Britain, where such assistance is haunted by the long shadow of the Poor Law.

Of course, Ashford’s argument in no way contradicts Nord’s more conjunctural argument but is, rather, complementary to it, providing a *longue durée* interpretation of the more resilient nature of French welfare institutions. The latter have deep roots in French society, built as they are around the participation of social partners. Indeed, they express the notion that state and society are interlocked, and that the former has a social obligation. This is quite different from the British welfare system that, from the turn of the twentieth century onward, was entirely conceived by civil servants and arrived, as it were, from on high. If the British are no less attached to their National Health and other public services, they are nonetheless never involved in the management of these crucial services. Perhaps that helps to explain why the French welfare state, though certainly under attack, has held up so much better than its Anglo-American counterparts.

This review has not begun to touch on a host of themes and particular histories that Nord develops, written on the basis of hitherto under-exploited collections, notably the papers of the eugenicist *Fondation Carrel* but also those of the *Institut national d’études politiques* (Sciences Po), which gave itself more than one makeover during these years in an ultimately successful effort to weather the multiple political storms of the era. These fascinating case-studies give flesh and nuance to the bones of Nord’s argument, and remind us that whatever the interest of various international comparisons, there is also a particularly French story to be told here. Philip Nord has told it in a masterful and arresting interpretation that alters and enriches our understanding of this period without ever letting us lose sight of the human actors as they struggled to remake institutions within the larger constraints of inherited frameworks and movements of history. A model of the historian’s craft, this is a field-defining book that will, I hope, inspire more work on this complex and fascinating era about which we still know far too little.

## NOTES

[1] Matthew Arnold, Preface to *Culture and Anarchy* (London, 1869), quoted on p. 14 of Nord, *France’s New Deal*.

[2] The JOC, JEC and JAC are the *Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*, the *Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne* and the *Jeunesse agricole chrétienne*, respectively. X-Crise was a group of *Polytechniciens* who rejected the polarized politics of Right and Left in 1930s France in favor of technocratic (hence supposedly neutral) solutions to political problems.

[3] Douglas Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1986).

[4] Ashford, 260.

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