



## BOOK REVIEW

**Brent Cebul**, *Illusions of Progress: Business, Poverty, and Liberalism in the American Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. 432pp. 10 halftones, 3 maps. 1 table. \$39.95 hbk.

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Writing at a time when urban scholars frequently address the ill effects of neo-liberalism, whether or not the actual term itself is applied, Brent Cebul manages to give the phenomenon of the private exploitation of public goods a novel and compelling interpretation. Tracing what he labels supply-side liberalism back to the New Deal, of all places, he demonstrates in fine detail how liberal initiatives aimed at social uplift and empowerment helped enrich and entrench conservative business and political interests at the expense of those most in need. Even as the federal commitment to justice and equity deepened in the second half of the twentieth century, communities of colour, in particular, suffered. Policy-makers in both parties, Cebul contends, nonetheless ‘remained confident in their public–private, local–national illusions of progress’ (p. 22).

Usually considered the opposite of modern conservatism in its embrace of federal activism, the New Deal nonetheless relied for fiscal and political reasons on local agents to execute its growth agenda. Given the means to offer relief, local elites seized the opportunity to advance their own agendas without allowing federal funding to upset existing social and political arrangements. So too, even as the presumably conservative Eisenhower administration accepted the Keynesian premises behind New Deal spending, it fostered local investments that damaged people of colour, not the least through the federal highways that ran through their communities. Lyndon Johnson’s mid-1960s War on Poverty briefly disrupted the comfortable alliance of government and business interests, but significantly Jimmy Carter, having built his successful political career through the kind of regional public–private partnerships that had proliferated throughout the South during the New Deal and its aftermath, restored the approach during his presidency. When Democrats faltered politically during the Reagan years, ‘New Democrats’ led by a group of young southern politicians, not the least Bill Clinton, crafted their own programmes in progressive terms but executed them with the same neoliberal effect, culminating in the termination of Aid to Dependent Families, the prevailing US welfare system.

Cebul’s account, like Gary Gerstle’s 2022 volume *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, encompasses a broad sweep of modern US political history. To ground his account in urban policy, however, Cebul illustrates his broader theme through consideration of the mid-size city of Rome, Georgia, and Cleveland, Ohio. While constituencies in the two locations differed considerably, he nonetheless shows how federal funding lifted the fortunes of the business sector at the expense of the

largely black working class. ‘Local elites’, he asserts, ‘implemented increasingly sophisticated ways of managing poor people’s “participation” in new rounds of development projects incorporating the ethic of participation less to solicit meaningful input than to seek acquiescence in community disinvestment and extraction’ (p. 21). While he cites some examples of protest in Cleveland particularly, the overall picture is of a structure weighted throughout the federal system to the detriment of social change. A key result over time, not surprisingly, was a sharp decline in minority voting participation, a situation that continues to the present.

Among the important urban topics Cebul covers are urban renewal, which he describes as the Democrats’ primary post-industrial policy, and revenue sharing, which the Republican Richard Nixon advanced to replace it. In the first instance, poorer, largely Black neighbourhoods gave way to new office and housing complexes and highways designed to reverse the effect of white flight to the suburbs. The subject naturally flows from the important online site, *Renewing Inequality* (<https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/renewal/#view=0/0/1&viz=cartogram>), which Cebul helped create to document levels of displacement in communities across the United States. Revenue sharing dispersed funds to a much wider number of communities, assuring that those most in need would find no easier access to resources than they did during the New Deal.

Cebul’s deep research widens the scope of urban policy formation, not the least by recounting the unfamiliar but important role of chambers of commerce, assessors and other business and local government agents in shaping the acquisition and application of government funding. It is a complex story, and consequently the writing is dense. But a close reading is worth the challenge. In effectively revealing how deeply embedded the biases of US political culture are and how difficult it has been to move the nation’s cities toward greater equity, his book goes a long way in showing why inequality has remained for so long, as he says, ‘national rather than regional, structural rather than exceptional, embedded in and reproduced by the evolving liberal state’ (p. 185).

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