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New Deal, New Look

In the 1940s the United States seemed to be on the cusp of adopting an economy that looked a lot like those found today in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. It was a collaboration of labor, business and government, and it had its roots in the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's expansive set of programs designed to pull the country out of the Great Depression.

By the 1950s, however, progressive dreams of a social democratic state had been stymied and, nearly 30 years later, many pronounced the New Deal dead with the election of Ronald Reagan as president.

The arc of the New Deal's life and its influence on the United States and the world will be re-examined in a three-day conference, "Beyond the New Deal Order," Sept. 24-26 at UC Santa Barbara. Hosted by UCSB's Center for the Study of Work, Labor, and Democracy, the conference is also supported by universities in France and Great Britain.

"From the viewpoint of historians, indeed, of the politically aware public during almost any campaign season, the meaning and legacy of the New Deal stands at the heart of many of the most important questions that illuminate American society and politics during the last hundred years," said Nelson Lichtenstein, professor of history and director of the center.

"Beyond the New Deal Order" will bring together some 70 scholars from the U.S. and Europe in a wide range of disciplines to consider what Lichtenstein calls "the

second most important event in American history” after the Civil War.

The conference gets its title from “The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980” (Princeton University Press, 1989), a landmark collection of 10 essays that sought to make sense of the New Deal’s comprehensive impact on American society in that half-century. Lichtenstein, who contributed a chapter to the book, says that 26 years after its publication, scholars are taking a fresh look at the New Deal. The book “was making the point that Reagan was ending the New Deal Order,” Lichtenstein explained. Today, “some of us think that judgment might have been premature, even though huge changes in the economy, domestic and global, have put forward new challenges to any new era of social and economic reform.”

For some scholars, the election of President Obama heralded a fresh New Deal to address many of the same economic and social issues that plagued the country 80 years ago. “That was the expectation,” said Lichtenstein, who called Obamacare “a big New Dealish victory.” In today’s political climate, however, the partisan divide has made resurrecting any additional New Deal reforms a difficult task.

“Do we have a left in America? Despite Bernie Sanders, we really don’t have the kind of left that we had even up through the 1960s,” Lichtenstein noted. “If we had a parliamentary system America would look like Europe in the ’30s with a fascist party on one side and socialist party on the other.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.