



2015

The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power. Steve Fraser. Reviewed by Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg

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Recommended Citation

Goldberg, Gertrude Schaffner (2015) "*The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power. Steve Fraser. Reviewed by Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg,*" *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 4 , Article 10. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol42/iss4/10>

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Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*. Little, Brown and Company (2015), 470 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover).

In this ambitious volume, historian Steve Fraser ponders a conundrum: why capitalism "red in tooth and claw" met fierce resistance during the "long nineteenth century" that included the First Gilded Age, and why our current, Second Gilded Age, is one of acquiescence. According to Fraser, "the long nineteenth century" dates from the 1870s through the 1930s and the New Deal. The First Gilded Age witnessed stunning technological progress and economic growth, along with tremendous economic inequality, and confrontations between the haves and have not verging on class war, even a feared second civil war. In the second part of the book, Fraser paints a scathing portrait of the current Gilded Age, similar to the first in the amassing of wealth and growth of economic inequality, but different because today's robber barons, instead of building the nation's industries, "cannibalized" the industrial edifice. Other authors have pointed to this difference, but Fraser makes another: differences in language. The first era was characterized by the strident, vituperative vocabulary of class conflict, whereas language in our Second Gilded Age has been "sanitized." Since rhetoric is an important weapon of resistance, today's tepid speech, partly a result of McCarthyism, is both a sign of and contributor to acquiescence.

According to Fraser, a major reason for acquiescence in the Second Gilded Age is, ironically, a legacy of the New Deal. Co-editor of an excellent volume, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (1989), Fraser credits the New Deal with "confront[ing] entrenched power and open[ing] up the political arena to the voiceless" (p. 304). Nonetheless, the New Deal installed "consumer capitalism," which undermines and corrodes the solidarity on which resistance and social movements are built. Other factors contributing to acquiescence are identified, significantly, the decline of the labor movement, the result of anti-Communist attacks and business opposition, on the one hand, and internal weaknesses in the movement itself on the other. What Fraser might have noted is that

moderate support of the labor movement by the Roosevelt administration gave impetus to organizational drives and militant action that resulted in tripling of union membership in the 1930s. That support has clearly been missing for many years, not least in the failure of the Obama administration to support the Employee Free Choice Act and in the anti-labor free trade agreements beginning with the Clinton Administration and including, most recently, the Trans Pacific Partnership.

"The long 19th century," according to Fraser, includes the 1920s, a period that bears considerable resemblance to the present era, not only in regards to the speculative excesses that contributed to the 1929 crash, but also its extreme and increasing economic inequality and scant resistance to these conditions. Fraser vividly relates the widespread, radical uprising of labor following World War I that might have made the twenties a far less acquiescent interval, had it not been violently quashed wherever it arose—not least by Woodrow Wilson's Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. I maintain that there are three gilded ages: Mark Twain's in the late 19th century, the "roaring twenties," and the period following the "Great U-turn" of the mid-1970s. Two out of three of these gilded ages are ages of acquiescence.

True, there was formidable resistance to entrenched economic power during the first Gilded Age, but the results were relatively meager on the federal level—leaving millions without relief and destitute in the wake of the 1929 Crash, not to mention the failure to have legalized collective bargaining.

Another difference related to resistance, in both the actual 19th century and the Great Depression, is the level of immiseration. Economic deprivation was certainly greater in both the actual 19th century and the 1930s than in the present era, for all its inequality. While need is not a sufficient condition for rebellion, it is a contributor. Three severe depressions in consecutive decades of the late 19th century, none evoking sufficient public relief, may well have contributed to the intensity of resistance. And, of course, resistance also peaked during the greatest of our depressions. Free of economic catastrophe for more than 60 years, the crash of 2008 erupted in a nation with some safeguards against destitution. Another New Deal legacy, the welfare state, however deficient, is a

factor in limited resistance. During the Great Recession and its aftermath, Unemployment Insurance increased five-fold and food stamps kept over 40 million people from hunger. A limping welfare state has added to acquiescence, just as Marx would have predicted.

As Fraser recognizes, there are some hopeful signs—like the organization of fast food workers aided by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Moreover, solidarity has indeed been evident in the movements on behalf of the LGBT community, even though economic inequality has not been the main thrust. And who knows where "Black Lives Matter" may lead? In any case, it's hard to predict what and when silent grievance may turn into organized resistance—despite the factors of acquiescence that Fraser has ably identified.

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Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Simon and Schuster (2015), 386 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover), and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*. Russell Sage (2014), 272 pages, \$35.00 (paperback).

Robert Putnam and Andrew Cherlin, among the foremost social scientists in the United States, have produced new books that offer us much insight into the present American condition. The former's *Our Kids* examines in great detail the ways in which the promise of equal opportunity has been severely compromised over the past fifty years by multiple changes in American life. The latter's cleverly titled *Labor's Love Lost* traces the rise and decline of the working class family over the course of U.S. history. The two books focus on the profound consequences of increasing economic inequality on family life and children. Although both exhibit admirable scholarly rigor, they are written with different goals and audiences in mind. Putnam aims for a broad, nonacademic readership and clearly hopes to affect current political debates and public policy. Cherlin, by contrast, has produced a more narrowly