

## ACTIVIST LIBERALISM

Jonathan Bell: *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. 343.)

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Since the 1960s, California has been widely regarded as a bellwether state. This is remarkable given that the state was out of sync with the rest of the nation during the thirties. The New Deal came late or not all to California,

depending on who is telling the story. Democrats held the governor's office for only one term between 1900 and 1958, and they never enjoyed a working legislative majority.

Jonathan Bell—who believes in robust ideology and organization—set out to explain in *California Crucible* how the state became so reliably Democratic in its politics and how multiple social movements for economic and social justice arose.

Bell associates the birth of modern post-World War II liberalism with the surviving New Deal formations that merged with emerging suburban middle-class elements associated with the campaigns of James Roosevelt, Helen Gahagan Douglas, and the 1952 Adlai Stevenson presidential campaign. Out of these stirrings emerged a new, dynamic organization: the California Democratic Council.

The CDC, organized labor, the California Democratic Party, and a network of minority groups forged an alliance in 1958 around the shared goal of defeating a Republican-backed antilabor right-to-work initiative, Proposition 18, and a desire to enact a fair employment law, and the campaign to elect Democratic candidates to state offices in order to advance a reform agenda. The Republican attacks on organized labor and new-found Democratic unity led to an electoral landslide by Democrats.

Under Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, liberalism achieved many of its most cherished goals, including the passage of fair employment and fair housing laws, expansion of public education, and various social welfare programs.

Bell argues that California liberals pursued a social democratic agenda that broadened and redefined itself in a way that incorporated those at society's margins: poor people, racial minorities, and gays and lesbians.

Bell notes that the CDC was unlike other reform groups of the 1950s, such as the Americans for Democratic Action. While it required members to be Democrats, it also welcomed radicals active during Roosevelt's New Deal. These activists provided an important orientation to grassroots politics.

Pioneering liberal politicians such as Alan Cranston, Willie Brown, Phil Burton, and Henry Waxman emerged out of this new liberal milieu, as did Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, whose United Farm Workers became a political force in its own right. In turn, the Burton organization sponsored Nancy Pelosi.

Bell succeeds in explaining and bringing to life a dynamic but little examined period of California history and explains its immediate and long-term significance.

He is at his best with a series of vignettes about figures such as Burton. Beyond his remarkable legislative achievements, Burton pioneered modern coalition politics in the early sixties in San Francisco. He wrested power from old-line ethnic Catholic Democrats by assembling a coalition of activists from the Popular Front era, most notably Harry Bridges's longshoremen, peace and social justice advocates, and Asians, Latinos, blacks, and gays.

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Bell's focus on race is important, given the absence of an Anglo majority population in the state today. He acknowledges the successful six-year campaign for fair employment waged by the California Committee for Fair Employment. He recognizes the committee head, African American C. L. Dellums, who also provided leadership for the NAACP and AFL Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, underscoring the centrality of New Deal-shaped laborite civil rights activism in California.

Bell would have strengthened his case for the role of organization and ideology in politics and policy had he mentioned that the California Committee for Fair Employment included Asian and Latino groups, an extensive roster of church leaders, and AFL and CIO union officials. The group's chief lobbyist, William Becker, worked out of the AFL California Federation of Labor headquarters in San Francisco with his salary paid by the Jewish Labor Committee. He was a former Socialist as was Dellums. Although Bell, who is interested in the Left, mentions the role of former Communists within the CDC, he missed the opportunity to more fully explain the diverse progressive landscape of that time.

More fully outlining the link between electoral politics and social movements within the Mexican American community would also have strengthened Bell's argument. For example, he describes Cesar Chavez's roots in the Community Service Organization but does not mention the CSO's role in supporting candidates and passing legislation. The CSO was very active in the fair employment coalition and members, as individuals, were part of CDC. As a result, the Democratic Party nominated two CSO officials for statewide office in the 1950s: Edward Roybal for lieutenant governor in 1954, and Henry Lopez for secretary of state in 1958. Then, in 1961, Governor Brown signed CSO's noncitizen, old-age pension bill authored by Burton.

Unmentioned was the liberal coalition's ability to win over conservative Democrats, which differentiated the labor-community coalitions in California during the Roosevelt and Brown years. This was critical because of the structural nature of political power in the state. Through the Brown years, growers and former Dust Bowl refugees in the Central Valley (Democrats all) had a disproportionate impact on the statehouse because seats in the State Senate were apportioned by county instead of population. As a result, farmers had more representatives in the upper house than the combined residents of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

Liberal politicians such as Governor Brown looked to culturally conservative voters in the rural and urban areas for support. He ran for governor as a progressive supporter of labor and minorities, but also as a church-affiliated family man with a reassuring law-and-order record as district attorney and attorney general. Brown enjoyed two terms before Republican Ronald Reagan denied him a third term by winning over conservative Democrats.

Bell ends the book by asking "the extent to which the question of economic justice, that for a time underpinned those civil rights [advances in the 1950s and 1960s], can be rejuvenated in an era of limits?" It is a penetrating

question. In my research, I have seen evidence that the liberal-labor-minority coalition has done better in California than in most other states in this regard owing to the rise of public-employee unions and millions of new Latino voters, voters representing a community in need of economic uplift and civil-rights protections. Republicans, in attacking Latinos in 1994 with Proposition 187, which sought to deny noncitizens access to education and health care, made a consequential mistake similar in scale to their forefathers' turning on the unions in 1958 by seeking to pass Proposition 18.

The political dynamic in California is, in many ways, richer and more diverse—and its coalitions more dynamic—than is portrayed in *California Crucible*. Still, Bell's study is a valuable and very welcome addition to the political history of the Golden State.

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