

Bringing the Invisible Triumphs of the New Deal to Light

Gray Brechin

Vice President, National New Deal Preservation Association

Advisor, California's Living New Deal Project

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Criticism of one of the nation's most important programs can be stopped in its tracks by exposing how it improved our lives.

Even those who remain unanimous in their hatred of what FDR accomplished unwittingly use and enjoy what he left behind. They can't avoid it; that legacy is as inescapable as it is indispensable. Before they succeed in wrecking it completely, we should learn at least to see it. For to do so will demonstrate what democratic government at its best can accomplish for all the people, rather than just those who can afford to buy it at discount.

The University of Chicago swamis whose [neoliberal theories](#) have wrought such havoc don't drink their own sewage because the Public Works Administration rebuilt their town's water system. Congressmen unalterably opposed to government spending and the K Street lobbyists plying them fly in and out of Reagan National Airport unaware that it — like most of the nation's airports — was built by the WPA (which also saved its namesake's bacon). Even the capital city itself is largely a New Deal creation. Those who enjoy the national parks, forests, and monuments threatened with closure by the GOP use lodges, trails, roads, and historic shrines built or improved by [CCC](#) "boys." If [Amity Shlaes'](#) children enjoy Central Park's playgrounds or zoo, or if they visit the Statue of Liberty, they owe a debt of gratitude to the New Deal workers who improved them seventy-five years ago.

That New Deal critics like Shlaes do not know they are using its legacy is hardly surprising: little of it — like the thousands of mature trees that arch over my hometown's streets — is marked. Nor would FDR's enemies want to acknowledge it, let alone what those creations did to rescue millions from despair, suicide, and crime. To do so would deal a body blow to their most cherished fantasies. It is far easier to repeat the mantra that "the New Deal didn't end the Depression, the war did" than to examine the falsity of that declaration, [as my colleague Richard Walker and I have done](#). Nor would it buttress their argument to admit the extent to which federal investment during the Great Depression helped win the war and paid huge dividends when it was over.

Take, for example, the public education that, we are told, the world's richest country can no longer afford. Many New Dealers had extensive experience in social work and shared the conviction that it is far cheaper and better for a society to uplift than to punish. The WPA and PWA therefore built thousands of modern schools and few prisons. They erected magnificent academic buildings and athletic facilities at the nation's public universities, and they constructed entire community college campuses. They built public libraries and museums as well, while WPA workers preserved and indexed collections for use today. WPA artists embellished many structures, such as Brooklyn College's library, with art exhorting students to match

and surpass the achievements of the past. Their inscriptions continue to advise us: “Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve” and “Education — The Defense of the State.” Meanwhile, over three million young men — many of them down-and-outers — received education in thousands of camps when they were not toiling to repair what unbridled market forces had done to the nation’s land. Today in their 80s and 90s, many of those veterans credit the three C’s with giving them an invaluable start in life.

We all stand today on the shoulders of giants who, unlike the veterans of our wars, have rarely been acknowledged for what they did for us. No museum exists for New Deal accomplishments, and only a few statues of “Iron John” remind visitors to our parks of the debt they owe to the men of the CCC.

For six years, I have been [working with others to map](#) what the New Deal’s public works agencies did for California. Now based at the U.C. Berkeley Department of Geography, the Living New Deal inventory is going national in an effort to engage thousands of Americans in a collective act of rediscovery. In the process, we will learn once again what enlightened governance can accomplish when it sets out to build not Dodge City but a civilization worthy of the name.

Gray Brechin is an historical geographer, visiting scholar in the U.C. Berkeley Department of Geography and founder and project scholar of California’s [Living New Deal Project](#).