Notes on “The New Deal:"

None of the Roosevelt Administration’s efforts to bring the country out of the Depression proved a lasting success. Its real achievements lay in reducing the worst features of the grinding poverty so many found themselves mired in. This involved numerous programs, routinely known by their initials to provide work to the unemployed or relief to the unemployable. It also involved convincing Americans that their government cared about their situation, something to which the letters to Eleanor Roosevelt quoted in the text attest. It involved too making the constitutional system work. Representative government failed in a number of European and Latin American countries and there were many in the US who advocated some sort of fascist or communist alternative. The New Deal’s greatest triumph, in this sense, may have been its demonstration that the American political system worked. FDR deserved much of the credit for this.

Supporters of the Soviet Union attacked the New Deal as an effort to prop up capitalism and save it from popular revolution. Right-wingers assaulted the New Deal for being Soviet Communism in an American form. The New Deal in fact represented an alternative to both the Communist and strict capitalist attitude about property. Communism aimed to abolish private property and make all material and financial wealth the collective possession of the people. Capitalism has been content to allow property to be distributed however circumstance or the market distributes it: to one family, a fortune of millions; to another, a tar-paper shack. The New Deal chose in effect to strengthen property by measures insuring that as many Americans as possible would have some of it. This it did in its efforts to promote ownership of homes and farms; in its provision of wages through public works; in its Social Security scheme, which gives participants something of the individual stake in it that a subscriber has in an insurance program. This support for the wide distribution of small property puts the New Deal in a long tradition of homegrown American radicalism, not in the category of European socialism or communism that the critics of the New Deal constantly charged.

The most primitive claim among the New Deal opponents was that property in a market system is the exact reward for hard work, and that the poor are always poor only because they have not worked hard. But no evidence exists that the market passes out its rewards chiefly on the basis of work or any other kind of merit. In any case, the American habit of identifying property with work has had the effect of shifting attention from the virtues of work to the virtues of wealth. The New Deal, in assuming that every family should have a solid slice of property as a means to a full and productive life, could have been a beginning to rescuing the work ethic from the American fascination with wealth.

Terms and Ideas:
- the “Roosevelt” style
- Roosevelt coalition
- the Bonus Army
- Huey P. Long
- Works Progress Administration
- “Brains Trust”
- CCC
- AAA
- deficit spending
- FDR as the savior of capitalism
- Townshend Plan
- Father Coughlin
- the “Hundred Days”
- “bank holiday”
- TVA
- NRA