Introduction

Did the New Deal revolutionize American life? Or was the America that emerged from the 1930's essentially the same as the America of the 1920's? If American life was changed, in what ways was it changed? If it was not changed significantly, why was this so? After all, the American people in the 1930's experienced the most severe economic crisis in their history.

Historians have been debating questions such as these since 1933. They raised them that early because many members of the American historical profession then believed that historians should be concerned with recent developments and contemporary affairs. These particular questions were raised because historians have a peculiar interest in the description, measurement, and explanation of change in human affairs. And questions were raised about the New Deal for it seemed historically important, worthy of the historian's serious attention.

This book seeks to help students think about change in the 1930's. The book's method is historiographical. It traces the development of American historical thought about the New Deal. But the book's aim is historical understanding. While I hope that the reader will become better acquainted with historians and the development of their thought, this is not the major objective of the book. That objective is increased understanding of the New Deal and its impact on American life. The book's basic assump-

tion is that study of the efforts by historians to interpret the New Deal supplies penetrating insights into the New Deal. We shall follow the development of their thought as they brought their particular point of view to bear on Roosevelt's domestic policies and gained new information about them and new perspectives on them.

For most professional historians in the 1930's who were concerned as historians with the New Deal, it seemed a significant part of a long-term development that changed American capitalism and other aspects of American life in desirable ways. This interpretation is developed by Arthur M. Schlesinger in the first selection. He and others called attention to the New Deal's links with the reform movement of the early years of the century. They did see change in the 1930's, but they maintained that it was in line with the hopes, aspirations, and ideas of men such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. These historians did not see the New Deal as a radical, revolutionary movement—nor did they desire a revolution. They saw it as evolutionary and reformist. The main result of twentieth-century reform was an enlarged role for government in economic affairs. And since the people exerted a large influence on the government and benefited from its actions, American capitalism became more democratic as a consequence of the success of American reform. The New Deal, in short, reformed and improved capitalism significantly.

If this was the majority view, it was challenged in the 1930's by historians such as Louis M. Hacker, just as Roosevelt and the New Deal were challenged by Norman Thomas and many other critics on the left. There was, in other words, a significant left-wing interpretation of the New Deal in the American historical profession at the time. Although Hacker noted some desirable changes, he did not see the New Deal as democratic. He denied that the New Deal changed America in fundamental and desirable ways and stressed the New Deal's benefits to the nation's most powerful economic groups. Although the role of government was enlarged substantially—and dangerously—the system remained capitalistic. Not a revolution, the New Deal was an effort to revive and prolong the life of a system that had collapsed.

Both of these interpretations survived into the postwar years. Henry Steele Commager, the author of the third selection, developed an interpretation that resembled Schlesinger's of a decade earlier, while Broadus Mitchell, the author of the fourth selection, looked at the New Deal from the left as Hacker had in the 1930's. Mitchell, however, represented a point of view that was losing influence in the profession and in American intellectual life generally in the postwar years.

The influence of the left was in decline. Once again, surprisingly perhaps, Hacker provides an illustration. He now evaluated the New Deal from a procapitalist rather than an anticapitalist point of view and developed an interpretation that emphasized change rather than continuity. He argued that the New Deal was a revolution involving a vast enlargement of the role of government in economic affairs.

Some historians of the 1950's who agreed with Hacker about the amount of change the New Deal produced had greater enthusiasm for the "Third American Revolution." The sixth selection, by Carl N. Degler, provides the best illustration of this historical interpretation. Degler stressed several areas in which changes seemed so great as to justify the label "revolution." They included the development of Big Government and Big Labor.

By the late 1950's and early 1960's, the left was not well represented in the historical profession; neither was the right. In this situation, a positive appraisal of the New Deal dominated historical interpretation of it. In 1962 Professor Schlesinger polled seventy-five of the profession's most prominent members and learned that they regarded the leading New Dealer, Franklin Roosevelt, as one of America's greatest presidents.

Two basic assumptions were involved in the historians' high regard for Roosevelt and the New Deal. One was that American history, compared with the history of other nations, was essentially a success story. The other was that one should be "realistic" in appraising presidents and their programs and should not demand wisdom and success at every point. Influenced by these assumptions, most historians of the New Deal in the early 1960's believed that it had been quite successful and had improved American life impressively.

American liberalism exerted a major influence on American historical thought at the time, and the most prominent liberal historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., developed the largest and

one of the most distinguished histories of the "age of Roosevelt." Much like his father two decades earlier, the younger Schlesinger viewed the New Deal as part of the tradition of American reform that changed America in desirable and democratic ways. The New Deal represented a superior "middle way" between unfettered capitalism and socialism. It was pragmatic, rejecting the rigid ideologies, doctrines, and dogmas of both left and right. The seventh selection provides a small sample of the younger Schlesinger's work.

By the 1960's, New Deal historiography was developing very rapidly. Perspective was lengthening, and new sources were becoming available. For some time, historians had been able to use a published edition of Roosevelt's public papers, and other New Dealers had supplied historians with an unusually large number of published memoirs, journals, and diaries. In addition, the first presidential library, the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, New York, which was opened soon after Roosevelt's death in 1945, supplied a very rich collection of unpublished manuscripts at a surprisingly early date. These resources stimulated research and writing on the New Deal, and many specialized studies were published during the 1950's and 1960's.

As research and publication moved forward, they created especially great difficulties for the argument that the New Deal was a revolution. The historians did not deny that the New Deal had changed the system. Some, in fact, such as Irving Bernstein, the author of the eighth selection, called attention to quite substantial changes. But the new work also emphasized the preparations for the New Deal. This was, of course, an old theme that had been developed earlier by the elder Schlesinger and Commager, among others. But now historians did not merely emphasize the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century. They also called attention to the New Deal's debts to World War I and the 1920's. Clarke A. Chambers supplied a major illustration of this development in a book on social reformers from 1918 to 1933 that demonstrated that progressivism developed during the 1920's and that the developments connected prewar progressivism with the New Deal. He did not deny that the New Deal changed America significantly, but he suggested that the changes

constituted a stage in a long-term movement and a response to more than the special conditions of the 1930's.

Also, some of the scholars emphasized factors that limited change in the 1930's. Ellis Hawley, the author of the tenth selection, supplied one of the major interpretations of this type. He found defects in the New Deal that were rooted in American culture. The American people and their political representatives could not make up their minds about the ways in which the economic system should be changed, and as a result of their conflict, indecision, and inconsistency, the system was not changed nearly as much nor in the precise ways that different groups of New Dealers desired. One major consequence of this was the survival of Big Business. In spite of the severe depression, it was neither destroyed nor reduced in size.

Other scholars of the 1960's emphasized the strength of right-wing opposition to the New Deal as *the* factor limiting change in the 1930's. Here, James T. Patterson's work was especially important. As the eleventh selection reveals, he stressed the growing strength of a "conservative coalition" in Congress. By the late 1930's, this coalition was effectively resisting the efforts of New Dealers to change American capitalism and other aspects of American life. Because of this effective resistance, the New Deal was not able to change the nation as much as new Dealers desired.

The historians were developing the picture of a New Deal that changed American life but did not revolutionize it. They were supplying evidence on both the predepression conditions and movements out of which the New Deal emerged and on the factors in the 1930's that limited the amount of change that took place during that period.

By the late 1960's, some historians were moving even further away from the revolution thesis. By then, the increasing availability of research materials was not the only major influence on the historical interpretation of the New Deal. Another was the set of obvious problems in American life. Poverty, for example, remained a large part of American life in spite of the reform movement. The problems of American life stimulated the rise of a "New Left" in American politics and in American intellectual

life, and this development was reflected in the movement of New Deal historiography. Once again, the New Deal was viewed from the left.

Although the New Left interpretation resembled the work of Hacker and Mitchell in the 1930's and 1940's, it was not a rehash. The new interpretation was heavily influenced by the problems of the present, and its critique of the New Deal was developed much more explicitly and forcefully.

Barton J. Bernstein, the author of the twelfth selection, presented a New Left interpretation of the New Deal. He and his colleagues in the late 1960's not only denied that the New Deal was a revolution but also denied that it changed and improved America significantly. In their view, it had promoted no more than small changes. Rather than stress accomplishments, these historians emphasized shortcomings and failures, especially the New Deal's failure to end the domination of American life by Big Business. Furthermore, in their efforts to explain the failure to produce a desirable social and economic system, Bernstein and others stressed defects in the New Deal itself, especially the ideological weaknesses of the New Dealers. These historians did not point to conservative opposition to the New Deal or to other difficulties in the situation as the explanation of America's failure to undergo a revolution in the 1930's.

The New Left interpretation achieved great prominence but did not sweep the field. Most American historians continued to regard Roosevelt as one of the greatest American presidents, and the New Left interpretation of the New Deal was criticized by historians who penetrated to fundamental assumptions about the ways in which the historical process does work and historians should work.

The critics are represented here by Jerold S. Auerbach, a young historian who emphasized the inadequacies of the New Left historians as historians and the accomplishments of the New Deal. He argued that Bernstein and others were too heavily influenced by the problems and ideas of the present and did not make an adequate effort to understand the 1930's, the aspirations of the people, and the obstacles encountered by those who then hoped to change American life. And Auerbach maintained that in spite of those obstacles and even though the New Deal

was not a revolution, it did change American life significantly.

Where are we now after tracing the development of American historical thinking about the New Deal over a period of more than thirty years and examining the debate among historians over the historical significance of the New Deal? We have at least defined the positions in the debate. They include three basic interpretations concerning the amount of change brought about by the New Deal. One labels the New Deal a revolution; the second views it as an important stage in an evolutionary process that had begun long before and insists that though the New Deal produced a significant amount of change it did not produce enough to be called a revolution, and the third denies that the New Deal changed America significantly. The debate also includes two basic appraisals of the New Deal—one negative and one positive. Furthermore, historians have disagreed about the explanations of the changes—or lack of changes—in the 1930's, with some pointing to the New Dealers and others emphasizing other people and other forces.

Perhaps this examination of the record will result in confusion rather than enlightenment. I hope, however, that students will receive intellectual stimulus from the debate among historians. It should force readers to discern and compare the support offered for the different estimates of the amount of change in American life produced by the New Deal and the different explanations of the New Deal's accomplishments or lack of them. The debate should also force students to recognize the influence of assumptions in the work of historians and find ways to make their own appraisals of those assumptions. Change in the amount of evidence available is not the only factor producing change in historical interpretation.

The effort involved in working through this small volume should also provide practical benefits as well as intellectual stimulus. American life of the present day is in part the product of the New Deal. Consequently, an effort to understand it is an effort to understand our present situation. Furthermore, an effort to understand change in the 1930's should help us understand change and the ways of producing it in the 1970's and should assist us in the shaping of our expectations.