The Red Scare Deformed the New Deal by Purging Its Radical Civil Servants

BY

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The New Deal brought a generation of leftists into the federal government. But Red Scare anti-communists purged these radical bureaucrats or forced their politics rightward — blocking more far-reaching reform and distorting our understanding of the New Deal.

Many accounts of the New Deal, whether told from a liberal or a radical perspective, paint it as fundamentally pro-capitalist. The project's architects sought to save capitalism from its excesses and reform the system so that more extreme alternatives — fascism on the Right, communism on the Left — did not take root. Once economic prosperity and political stability were restored post–World War II, New Dealers' incentive for further reform disappeared.

But this story is partially accurate at best. In fact, many people who joined the Roosevelt administration at high levels in the 1930s were radicals who viewed the New Deal as a chance to empower labor, reorient the economy around democratic priorities rather than the profit motive, and advance the interconnected causes of racial, gender, and economic equality.

As early as the late '30s, conservatives attacked many of these radicals as communists and subversives and undercut the most ambitious New Deal efforts, as historian Landon R. Y. Storrs details in her 2012 book *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left*. Eventually, much of the New Deal left was either forced out of

government or, likely bowing to anti-communist hysteria, moderated their politics to remain eligible for government service.

Because many of these reformers suffered harrowing loyalty investigations and ended up concealing earlier leftist views and associations, we've inherited a distorted understanding of the New Deal. These radical reformers' long-buried story reveals the potential vistas of that heady period — and the role that socialist civil servants can play in projects of sweeping reform.

New Deal Radicals

In the 1930s, the massive New Deal expansion of the federal government attracted a generation of young leftists to Washington, DC. These reformers brought systemic critiques of capitalism, arguing that the federal government should promote economic democracy to combat the destructive tendencies that spawned the Great Depression and to foster greater equality along class, racial, and gender lines. Though quite a few were skeptical of Roosevelt's administration, they all came to believe that New Deal programs could be a vehicle for their ambitious vision.

This cohort were not, by and large, Communist Party members. Some called the Socialist Party their home, but many were unaffiliated with any left-wing party. They were generally nonsectarian in outlook and believed in using the United States' existing democratic institutions to promote their radical goals.

Storrs tells the story of several interesting figures from this group. Among them were Mary Dublin Keyserling and Leon Keyserling, two reformers whose youthful leftism exemplified the broader New Deal left.

Mary was a member of the Socialist Party, trained in economics, and a leading figure in the consumers' movement of the Depression era. This oft-forgotten movement saw the fate of consumers and workers as inseparable: seeking to promote economic equality and stability by raising the purchasing power of middle- and working-class people, it fought for price controls and product regulation as well as higher wages and labor protections. The organization Mary led for a time, the National Consumers' League, ran a victorious campaign to pass the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, "which established the first permanent national standards for a minimum wage and national hours."

Mary Dublin Keyserling (US Department of Labor)

She moved to Washington in 1940, where she began a career in federal government that lasted into the ’60s and married Leon Keyserling. Leon was a legislative aide to Senator Robert Wagner and was responsible for drafting several pivotal pieces of New Deal legislation, including the National Labor Relations Act (or Wagner Act) of 1935, which institutionalized collective bargaining rights for workers, and the 1937 US Housing Act. Leon went on to serve in the US Housing Authority and, like Mary, worked in federal government for decades. He was also a socialist, writing to his father in 1937 that New Deal reforms would create a “chain reaction” through which “the power of capitalism is going to be weakened to the point of extinction.”

But the Keyserlings’ story was unfortunately typical of the period’s left-wing reformers in another way: the Second Red Scare wreaked havoc on their lives and likely pushed them to temper their radical politics.

The Red Scare and Its Legacy

The post–World War II Red Scare is usually associated with Senator Joseph McCarthy and the anti-communist witch hunts he led in the 1950s. But attacks on supposed subversives in the federal government began much earlier,

with right-wingers accusing the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) of being under "Communist influence" in 1938.

Persecution of leftists in government took off with the creation of the federal employee loyalty program in the early 1940s. Formalized under President Harry Truman in 1947, the program hit several hundred people with loyalty investigations. The official purpose was to root out communist spies working under orders from Moscow. But the vast majority of people investigated were not communists, much less communist spies — conservatives simply wanted to purge the bureaucracy of left-wing elements.

Members of the Council of Economic Advisers and White House staff members working on the President's Midyear Economic Report, 1949. Leon Keyserling is third from left. (National Archives via Wikimedia Commons)

Red Scare demagogues achieved their aims in part through mobilizing prejudices against women, gays, and racial and ethnic minorities. Many New Deal radicals, like Mary Dublin Keyserling, were feminist women who saw economic reform as essential to reducing female dependence on men and achieving gender equality for women of all classes; as ambitious professionals, they also challenged traditional gender roles in their personal lives, often with the support of their male coworkers (who, in many cases — like Leon Keyserling's — were also their husbands).

The Right eagerly deployed sexist tropes to slander women New Dealers and their spouses, tying women's nontraditional ideas about gender roles to the threat of communist subversion of the "American way of life." Left-

wing men in the bureaucracy were vilified as "effeminate," especially if they were married to powerful women. Those suspected of being gay were said to be especially vulnerable to Soviet blackmail and control and therefore unfit for government employment.

Again, the Keyserlings' experience is illustrative. Storrs writes:

> When the ex-Communist informant Paul Crouch claimed he had known Dublin Keyserling to be a Communist in her youth, he played up her beauty. "She was brilliant but didn't look it," he told the FBI, as if being both smart and beautiful made her inherently deceitful. He and J. B. Matthews [another informant] portrayed Dublin Keyserling as an attractive, romantic rich girl seduced by — and perhaps willing to seduce for — radical causes.

Likewise, a conservative radio broadcaster "impugned Leon Keyserling's masculinity by pointing to his Ivy League background, lack of war service, lack of employment outside government, and his childless marriage to a professional woman."

Though McCarthy and the excesses of postwar anti-communist hysteria were eventually curtailed in the mid-1950s, by then the Second Red Scare had achieved much of what it had set out to do. The New Deal's most radical ambitions had been blocked, and many of the civil servants who advocated far-reaching reforms had either been expelled from Washington or forced to change their political stripes.

After facing numerous loyalty investigations beginning in the early '40s, the Keyserlings both resigned from their government posts in 1953. They started a private consulting firm, the Conference on Economic Progress (CEP), where they worked until Mary returned to DC in 1964 as director of the US Women's Bureau.

Meanwhile, the Keyserlings' writings shifted right. "CEP publications reflected the Keyserlings' long-standing commitment to increasing the purchasing power and raising the living standards of the nation's poor and working-class citizens," Storrs writes. "Gone, however, was the critique of inequality that had underpinned their earlier advocacy."

The Keyserlings also became outspoken anti-communists and Democratic Party loyalists. They refused to criticize Lyndon Johnson's administration, even when feminists complained that his Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was failing to crack down on sexual discrimination and when his Vietnam War had become a bloody morass.

Storrs acknowledges that her claim that the Keyserlings moved to the political center because of grueling loyalty investigations is speculative. But "the timing and all-consuming nature of the loyalty investigations," she writes, "makes it hard to discount their impact." Other New Deal leftists who went through the anti-communist wringer followed similar trajectories.

These included, to name just a few: Catherine Bauer Wurster, a pioneering advocate of US public housing who became a harsh critic thereof during the Eisenhower administration; Wilbur Cohen, a leading left-wing figure in the creation of New Deal welfare programs who later came to "[treat] unemployment and poverty as evidence of the failings of individuals more than of the labor market"; and Charlotte and David Demarest Lloyd, champions of labor and consumer rights who either left public life (in Charlotte's case) or moved into "less controversial" policy areas such as water desalination (in David's case).

What is not speculative is that the Red Scare has marred our understanding of the politics of many New Deal policymakers. During the investigations, loyalty investigation defendants often misrepresented their political views and past activities. The Keyserlings, for instance, attempted to cover up Mary's Socialist Party membership and her close relationship with her sister and brother-in-law, who were Communist Party members; both Mary and Leon downplayed the radicalism of their youth and how long they espoused those views. When they prepared records of their papers for archives, they largely omitted reference to their ordeals with the loyalty program as well as their left-wing allegiances. Other loyalty defendants did the same.

Consequently, the far-reaching aspirations of key New Deal reformers — and the role right-wing repression played in foreclosing those horizons — has been largely forgotten.

The New Deal Left and Working-Class Politics

The story of the left-wing bureaucrats victimized and stymied by the Red Scare suggests some questions about what might have been and what could be. How might the Left have responded to right-wing attacks? And how should contemporary socialists think about left-wing civil service?

On the first question: Many other advanced capitalist countries experienced their own postwar red scares, but their left-wing movements had the benefit of mass political parties with working-class bases that helped fend off attempted anti-left purges. In the United States, radicals under attack had to face down enemy fire largely on their own, with at-best unreliable allies in the Democratic Party. (A case in point: Democratic president Harry Truman occasionally came to the aid of loyal administration employees targeted by McCarthyism, such as the Lloyds, but he was responsible for establishing the federal employee loyalty program in the first place.) The closest thing to a mass left party in the United States in the 1930s and '40s, the Communist Party, had nowhere near the organized working-class base that Communist and social-democratic parties boasted in peer nations.

And how about today? Though most of the New Deal left's hopes for fundamental reform were dashed, their efforts show the importance of having radicals in the civil service. Many pioneering New Deal policies were designed by leftists. Indeed, perhaps the single most important piece of New Deal legislation — the Wagner Act — was written by a socialist, Leon Keyserling.

Felix Cohen, one of the radicals profiled in Storrs's book, put the point well: with left-wingers in the bureaucracy, the state can become

> more than a conscious agent of vested interests, and . . . a political seizure of power by a party that appeals to the masses will not face the threat of sabotage from within the civil service, though it will undoubtedly face that threat from Big Business.

Were a left-wing government to come to power in the United States, it would certainly need allies in the federal bureaucracy who could implement its program, or at least who wouldn't actively undermine it. Democratic socialists would also bring a unique perspective to the civil service. Rather than seeing the federal government merely as an instrument through which enlightened elites bestow benefits on the unwashed masses, we see policy as a tool for deepening democracy and popular participation. That was also the promise that many Depression-era leftists saw in the New Deal.

It's an interesting question how we might build a solid bench of democratically minded left-wing civil servants. Many socialist militants today are taking certain jobs (nursing, teaching, logistics, etc.) as part of an effort to reinvigorate and democratize the labor movement and reconnect the Left with a broader working-class base. Maybe some socialists should consider careers in the bureaucracy as a way of cultivating the policy chops and know-how that our project will eventually need.

But even the most die-hard militants will be able to achieve little without the "party that appeals to the masses," in Cohen's words. Alongside the issue of developing a core cadre that can design and implement transformative policy, there remains the problem of cohering the popular base that would support a left-wing program and mobilize to defend it against attacks. The legacy of the Second Red Scare reminds us of the fragility of reform projects that aren't rooted in such a base.

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