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# Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics In A Progressive Age



## Synopsis

"The most belated of nations," Theodore Roosevelt called his country during the workmen's compensation fight in 1907. Earlier reformers, progressives of his day, and later New Dealers lamented the nation's resistance to models abroad for correctives to the backwardness of American social politics. *Atlantic Crossings* is the first major account of the vibrant international network that they constructed--so often obscured by notions of American exceptionalism--and of its profound impact on the United States from the 1870s through 1945. On a narrative canvas that sweeps across Europe and the United States, Daniel Rodgers retells the story of the classic era of efforts to repair the damages of unbridled capitalism. He reveals the forgotten international roots of such innovations as city planning, rural cooperatives, modernist architecture for public housing, and social insurance, among other reforms. From small beginnings to reconstructions of the new great cities and rural life, and to the wide-ranging mechanics of social security for working people, Rodgers finds the interconnections, adaptations, exchanges, and even rivalries in the Atlantic region's social planning. He uncovers the immense diffusion of talent, ideas, and action that were breathtaking in their range and impact. The scope of *Atlantic Crossings* is vast and peopled with the reformers, university men and women, new experts, bureaucrats, politicians, and gifted amateurs. This long duration of contemporary social policy encompassed fierce debate, new conceptions of the role of the state, an acceptance of the importance of expertise in making government policy, and a recognition of a shared destiny in a newly created world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The title *Atlantic Crossings* refers to the cross-pollination of social thinking between the United States and Europe (primarily Britain) in the first half of the 20th century. Princeton history professor Daniel T. Rodgers's extensive narrative shows that while many Americans saw themselves as essentially isolationist, many ideas that influenced their daily lives, such as city planning and concepts of social security, were not homegrown. A network of government planners, academics, and concerned citizens communicated back and forth across the Atlantic; their correspondence was marked by controversy, and an aversion to "non-American" ideas persists in American social planning to this day (Rodgers notes the scuffles over health care reform in the early 1990s as one example). Rodgers has assembled a prodigious mountain of facts, and he's written a credible and comprehensive account of how people on both sides of the Atlantic contributed in sometimes surprising ways to the social reforms we consider utterly American. --Robert McNamara --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It's an ambitious book that attempts to reinterpret even one historical era, let alone two. And to do so across borders at that. "Nations lie enmeshed in each other's history," writes Princeton's Rodgers, prefacing his argument that our progressive era and the New Deal were chapters in an age of social politics when the United States was open to overseas influence as never before or since. Between 1870 and World War II, a new intensity in market relations, urbanization, and working-class grievance struck both Europe and America, leading progressives to import ideas on zoning and city planning, housing and social insurance, agriculture and rural community. The resulting "logjam" of proposals was broken only in the New Deal era, the last historical moment prior to a renewed sense of American exceptionalism. If Rodgers, a graceful writer and eclectic researcher, sometimes strains his thesis, the sheer mass of his examples will compel other scholars to assess their own interpretations within his framework. For all academic and larger public libraries. A Robert F. Nardini, North Chichester, NH Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Professor Daniel Rodgers wrote his work entitled *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* in order to challenge the prevailing notion that much, if not all, of the reform that took place during the Progressive Era had its roots in America. Professor Rodgers charts the shift in American reform alongside that of Europe, beginning in the 1870s when American students first heard of the assailment of the laissez-faire style of government in German universities of the late 19th century.

The U.S. benefitted from a transatlantic network that spread ideals overseas, and America was initially the recipient of these European ideals. As the network and American reform in general began to evolve, the trading of principles became much more balanced and intricate, eventually leading to the culmination of many ideas and proposals in the New Deal legislation. World War II ended this network, however, because of the disparaging effects it had on the North Atlantic nations. Following WWII, the U.S. shifted into an era of American exceptionalism as the country entered the Cold War. In *Atlantic Crossings*, Professor Rodgers argues that the "reconstruction of American social politics" started with an influx of political and social ideals from a network that was fueled and tied together by capitalism and trade among the countries of the North Atlantic (3).

Professor Rodgers argues that all of the reform in the U.S. during the Progressive Era originated in Europe, and he tends to undervalue the difficult task American reformers completed in altering European ideals in order to fit certain American idiosyncrasies. Professor Rodgers does, however, credit American reformers for being cognizant of the vital role their country played in the global reform movement as a hub for all kinds of change, not just single facets of it as was the case for many European nations. Generally, Professor Rodgers describes the roots of the American Progressive Era with relative objectivity, providing factual evidence on a wide variety of subjects to support his claim. His reasoning is thorough and sound, and he defends his position adequately without having to address a counterargument. In *Atlantic Crossings*, Professor Rodgers supports his thesis through insightful analysis of facts, and he has clearly left no rock unturned while digging for research, which clarifies his topic even more because of the enormous supply of details. Perhaps the earliest sign of reform in the U.S. was the number of American students studying economics in Germany in the 1870s leading up to the turn of the century. In 1906, Henry Walcott Farnam, professor of political economics at Yale College, polled the 116 best economists in Canada and the U.S., and "59 had spent a student year or more in Germany" (86). This was so significant because it showed how much influence German economists had on American students. Economic principles were not the only thing that American students brought back with them from Germany. These economists, many of them educators, brought with them educational techniques used in the German universities. We still see many of these techniques today, such as "lecture, seminar, research paper, monograph, scholarly journal, graduate education, and the Ph.D. degree" (97). This reflects the colossal impact the German education system had on American educational reform in the late 19th century. Paul Kellogg was one of the American reformers who recognized the importance of American involvement in the transatlantic network during the Progressive Era. As editor of *Survey* magazine, Kellogg turned his periodical into America's leading social work journal.

Kellogg went on to publish his in-depth study of industrial life in Pittsburgh after studying the factories there from 1910-1914. This study, called the Pittsburgh Survey, became the model for sociologists wishing to use statistical data and scientific analysis to help social reform. Despite being one of the leaders of social reform in the U.S., in 1913 Kellogg reached out to reformers from elsewhere in the transatlantic progressive connection, such as British reformers John Burns, Henrietta Barnett, J.A. Hobson, Sidney Webb, Irish reformer Horace Plunkett, and Scottish reformer Keir Hardie. He asked all of these well-known progressives for ways that Americans could push their civilization into a new age. Professor Rodgers praised Kellogg because his gesture "encapsulated the transatlantic moment in American social politics" by displaying a clear understanding that the U.S. was very important to the global reform movement, but Americans were not quite fully equipped to enact any relatively substantial change, at least, not without some direction and guidance from extremely active European reformers (267). Professor Rodgers states that while he agrees with the notion that American reformers were crucial in achieving much of the success during the Progressive Era, they would not have known what to do with their democratic values without the assistance of their partners along the transatlantic network. Clarence Poe, a leader of the Populist Party and one of the men on the forefront of agricultural reform in the U.S., exemplified a southern American reformer. He worked his way up in the periodical the Progressive Farmer, and quickly became well-versed on agricultural reform. After two trips to Europe, where he studied the social programs of Lloyd George in London and Horace Plunkett's agricultural cooperatives in Ireland, Poe returned to his native North Carolina in awe of the "atheoretical practicality of European governments," which included investments in roads, commerce education, and especially their post offices (323). Poe then gained relative success in implementing many of the European style changes into legislation in southern states, making agriculture a solid foundation for the national economy. Legislators will return to this concept in the New Deal in an attempt to try and restore the depressed economy to its previous state. Without studying the European examples of the reform in action, Poe would have never been able to enact the impactful reform he passed. Professor Rodgers' argument in *Atlantic Crossings* disagrees with the common perception of Progressive Era reformers in the U.S. Many textbooks and non-fiction works sensationalize the role American reformers played in the global movement for reform, while Professor Rodgers makes the claim that American reform is rooted deeply in European reform. Professor Rodgers' notion that a transatlantic network enabled countries of the North Atlantic to trade social ideals is somewhat revolutionary. Although Professor Rodgers claims that "every contemporary who follow[s] these issues" knows that this network exists and caused the Progressive Era in the U.S., I have never

read or heard anything about this so I think that many historians would take issue with this statement (3). Generally, *Atlantic Crossings* presents a lot of new ideas and concepts about the Progressive Era that, I'm guessing, have since become the standard for historians. I thought the book went into great detail about specific parts of the Progressive Era. Unfortunately, I feel it left out some pertinent information. Professor Rodgers obviously provided a lot of detailed information on the European reformers and their relationships with the American reformers because that is the information that chiefly supports his argument. However, I think Professor Rodgers' cupboard runs a tad dry when it comes to details on educational reform in the U.S. and reform in the south. I know they were both limited relative to other types of reform that took place in this period, but I felt that there was much more reform throughout the nation than the trends brought over from Germany in the late 19th century, such as the 1925 Scopes trial, which addressed educational reform in the U.S. I also think more took place in southern states than agricultural cooperatives. But, once again, this reform may not have necessarily had roots in Europe so Professor Rodgers may have been apprehensive about sharing details that did not directly support his claims. This book actually changed my mind about the Progressive Era. In both our NASH and AAMSCO textbooks, American leaders like President Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson are heralded as progressives but both of their reform policies had deep roots in Europe. Many American leaders during this period, in fact, looked to Europe for inspiration. Only after American reformers had "caught up" to their European counterparts did Americans start to enact changes different from those in Europe. Overall, Professor Rodgers does an excellent job of examining the topic of reform in Europe and the U.S. during the Progressive Era and presenting it without bias. He doesn't address all of the reform that took place, but he does address the vital changes. However, Professor Rodgers addresses and dispels many misconceptions in American culture and education today. We are so often taught that, while the Ancient Greeks may have invented democracy, we Americans perfected it. Professor Rodgers shows that the path toward democracy was a global effort. He shows that the trade of political, economic, and social ideals is what allowed the U.S. to take such "progressive" measures. Without assistance from our neighbors from across the pond, however, women and African-Americans might still not be able to vote, kids might still be working in factories, and our nation's economy might still be in a terrible depression.

Daniel T. Rodgers's *Atlantic Crossings* is a massive historical undertaking that maps the exchange of ideas and social politics across the Northern-Atlantic from 1870 through WWII. With a transnational, intellectual, social, and political approach to history, Rodgers argues that modern

progressive social politics--with its high-water mark the "American" New Deal--were not bound by any nation, nor can they only be understood in the form of top-down welfare states. Instead, the "relatedness" between agents and thinkers in New Zealand, Australia, England, France, Germany, and the US constituted a "transnational traffic in reform ideas" in hopes of ameliorating the social costs of modern capitalism. The crux of Rodgers' diverse chapters are particular "brokers and intermediaries," so he uses both primary and secondary documents to contextualize these political "amateurs" within their larger socio-political contexts and constraints (26). Far-reaching, Rodgers examines, for instance, the transit, embrace, and WWI rejection of German economic philosophies, the influence of Parisian city planning, collectivism in housing, schooling, and rural cooperatives, and the modern "risks" and "problems" of labor, poverty, health, and transportation. Although Rodgers's argument is very convincing, his analyses smack of a top-down, privileged history--his "brokers and intermediaries," that is, are almost all white bourgeois. In this sense, he tacitly romanticizes the white worker and intellectual. He also narrowly examines the racial implications of the New Deal, slum clearance, and depression-era politics. Nonetheless, *Atlantic Crossings* is a magnificent achievement that questions any sense of American socio-political exceptionalism, and this is perhaps the most important take away: capitalism's excesses know no boundaries, no nation.

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