

Plowed Under: Food Policy Protests and Performance in New Deal America

Brian Q. Cannon
Brigham Young University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Cannon, Brian Q. "Plowed Under: Food Policy Protests and Performance in New Deal America." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 143-144.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12368>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Plowed Under: Food Policy Protests and Performance in New Deal America, by Ann Folino White. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015. x, 307 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 paperback.

Reviewer Brian Q. Cannon is professor of history at Brigham Young University. His publications include *Remaking the Agrarian Dream: The New Deal's Rural Resettlement Program in the Mountain West* (1996).

In this stimulating study of New Deal America, theater scholar Ann Folino White explores protests, exhibits, and a theatrical play about the supply and price of food. White distinctively interprets her historical evidence, drawn from careful research in 11 archives, through the lens of performance studies. Although the book does not focus on Iowa, it offers detailed case studies of midwestern protest movements and examines reactions to government food policies that affected Iowans.

White begins by scrutinizing theatrical elements in exhibits sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) at the 1933–34 Chicago World's Fair. One exhibit titled "The Shadow of Surplus" attributed low farm income to agricultural surpluses, essentially blaming farmers' success as producers for their low income. That exhibit was replaced after a few months partly because the fair's assistant administrator believed it was overly negative. The replacement exhibit celebrated the income-boosting impact of production controls instituted by the New Deal.

Next, the author analyzes a milk strike organized by the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool in 1933. When strikers stopped milk trucks and forcibly dumped their contents to drive up prices, local deputies and the National Guard deployed tear gas. White highlights performative aspects of the strike, including publicity leading up to it and the presence of thousands of spectators. Strikers billed themselves as the heirs of the American Revolution and melodramatically vilified processing corporations that profited from the low milk prices farmers received. News reporters resorted to stock, opposing portraits of strike organizer Walter Singler and Governor Albert Schmedeman. Singler was valorized as a skilled orator and athlete while the governor was depicted as small and weak. Descriptions of the weapons—tear gas and nightsticks for the state and rocks for the protestors—"spectacularized the repressive power of the state" (103). The evidence presented supports White's interpretation, but it comes from only three newspapers. Using competing newspapers from Madison and Milwaukee might have enabled the author to uncover a more varied media treatment of the strike.

In another richly textured, provocative case study that documents the leadership of an important Michigan activist, Mary Zuk, White analyzes a meat boycott organized by women in Hamtramck in 1935 to protest New Deal inflationary policies. White pinpoints theatrical and rhetorical elements of the protest, arguing that the women shrewdly adopted the persona of “housewives” who needed inexpensive meat to satisfy their husbands’ nutritional needs. Meanwhile, opponents dismissed the protest as pure theatrics, or “fake.”

White next examines a 1939 demonstration in which 1,300 Missouri sharecroppers protested New Deal limitations on cotton production that unintentionally incentivized landlords to evict sharecroppers. Critics alleged that the protests were a charade organized by unions; others identified the demonstration as authentic “human drama” (155). White detects artifice and sleight of hand behind the protest, pointing out that the participants received provisions by night “in a manner analogous to masterful stage management,” thereby allowing the protestors to continue their “performance” (172).

A final case study involves the Federal Theatre Project’s (FTP) play *Triple-A Plowed Under*, which premiered in 1936. White surveys the 26 scenes, which dramatized protests, including a meat strike, a milk strike, and the unionization of share croppers.

White argues that participants in these protests and productions demonstrated “sophisticated understanding of theatrical traditions” and carefully incorporated “theatrical elements from casting to dialogue to props to scenery” (4). They employed “theatrical strategies” in their “representation” of grievances and viewpoints, as did their opponents (13). She admits that even the most carefully scripted protests could spin out of control, though.

For historians, this interpretive approach works best in cases where memos or internal correspondence allow White to document organizers’ motives and strategies, as is the case in the USDA’s World’s Fair exhibit and the FTP play. Unfortunately, documentation of the plans and aims of the milk, meat, and sharecropping protesters is sparse. As White observes, acting is “intentional” and strategic in its “dissembling” (125); it is a carefully calculated performance. White vacillates between suggesting that the roles and props adopted by protesters reflected intentional acting and acknowledging that they might have constituted “unconscious performance” (125). Similarly, she is unable to determine whether the media hype leading up to the Wisconsin Milk Strike was “intentional or not” (78). Thus, White’s book demonstrates that analyses of politics and protests through the lens of performance studies can be both wonderfully suggestive and highly conjectural.