

Elizabeth E. Sine, *Rebel Imaginaries: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Depression-Era California*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1137-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1032-6 (cloth)

California looms large in the American memory of the Great Depression, in the photographs of Dorothea Lange, the songs of Woody Guthrie, and the stories of John Steinbeck. In Elizabeth Sine's *Rebel Imaginaries*, the version of the Depression many of us learned from a young age appears significantly incomplete. Here, for the multiracial communities of Black, Indigenous and People of Color of quite varied national origins living in California, the tragedies of the Great Depression were neither a rupture from a previously stable system, nor resolved through the policies of the New Deal. Rather, we see how communities already excluded from economic and political power nonetheless imagined and acted towards better futures for themselves within the crises. Sine works to reconstruct a history of radicalism that is neither the grandiose debates over whether the New Deal saved capitalism from itself at the expense of a revolutionary moment, nor a rehashing of the minutia of party sectarianism in social movements. She offers, instead, a series of provocative, place-based studies to argue that, despite the seeming absence of a coherent, shared or articulated political ideology, communities have no problem claiming their own dignity as a political act. Their self-organization and cultural practices demonstrate a collective rejection of the unjust conditions offered under racial capitalism.

Rebel Imaginaries is an ambitious effort in both its geographic and conceptual breadth. The book moves from farmworker's multiracial organizing in the Imperial Valley, to the famed waterfront and general strike of San Francisco, to migrants contesting the presumed politics of deportation and repatriation in Kings County, to the radical culture of community theaters and jazz clubs in Los Angeles, to the rise and fall of Upton Sinclair's EPIC campaign in relation to progressive Black candidates in Southern California, and finally to subversive musical and religious practices of young women in the rural Indigenous communities of Northern California's Round Valley. Although each chapter could warrant longer study on its own, the dispersed structure of the book is extremely effective at exploding any compulsion to reduce the experience of the Great Depression to a unified or universal narrative.

To sew together these disparate places, people and movements, Sine pulls through several threads drawn from critical labor histories, ethnic studies, and “contemporary surrealist theorists” (p.15). The surrealist framework, building in part from the work collected in Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley’s 2009 volume *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, was an unexpected angle to the book. However, Sine uses it effectively to address an overarching historiographical question of how to escape preconceived notions of politics in order to see the moments where people are driven by “not a common political agenda but a common emancipatory impulse” (p.14). This speculative lens into what motivates people beyond national and party politics allows Sine to reinterpret the significance well-known events such as the 1934 General Strike and EPIC campaign. Perhaps more importantly, surrealist theory connects less-known moments, such as how self-organized agricultural workers rebuked nationalist norms in deportation campaigns, or how Indigenous women subverted state-sanctioned music and religion, and presents them as evidence that people of all kinds have the radical capacity to imagine dignified futures for themselves.

This emphasis on bottom-up and often autonomous forms of politics appears in a growing body of work on radical traditions, and the Great Depression in California presents a particularly explosive period and place to explore just how multifaceted radical imaginaries can be. Through what Sine calls the “relative democratization of suffering” (p.57), she looks for the places where groups formed an understanding of shared plights across lines of racial, ethnic, national and class difference. Though, as she recounts, mutual recognition does not necessarily lead to mutual aid, such as the failure of the erstwhile radical EPIC campaign to seriously engage Black and Mexican-American communities. At the same time, she emphasizes the mutual recognition found in shared forms of cross-cultural production in community theaters and the movement of jazz between individuals near and far. The stories collected here remind us that, despite contemporary fretting over a fractured or unfocused American Left, no one way of “doing politics” has ever had a monopoly on radicalism. At the same time, many of those imagined futures have not become our shared present. So, we are left, still, with the question of how “rebel imaginaries” move from ideas that survive to those that transform systems of oppression.

California studies tend to assert the state as an exceptional place that acts as a meaningful political progenitor for the rest of the US and world. Sine does not take California exceptionalism for granted, convincingly arguing that Depression-era California was both a focal point of the Depression's most destabilizing impacts and uniquely positioned within the reconfiguring system of global capital. At the same time, "California" can be a convenient but incoherent container for analysis, and studies tend to either focus on regions and/or a narrowly defined topic. So, for example, at several points *Rebel Imaginaries* makes statewide comparisons between Los Angeles' and the City of San Francisco's relative political cultures, which comes at the expense of situating San Francisco in relation to the violence and segregation of the Bay Area as whole. The socio-economic relations between San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and the dozens of towns and rural spaces between them are arguably more determinant of people's lives than a more abstract relation to other places in California.

I do not mean to overstate Tobler's "first law" as a clunky critique here. There are certainly models for understanding distant, multi-scalar relations in California—Ruth Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* (2007) remains the example par excellence for geographers interested in connecting local social movements, state politics and global economic forces—but they tend to rely on more narrowly defined topics than *Rebel Imaginaries*. If anything, Sine's project, with its emphasis on the multitude of experiences across multiracial identities and different geographies, actively refuses to synthesize California into a singular place: downtown LA cannot stand in for rural Mendocino. It does, however, offer tantalizing seeds for future work that explores how spatial relationships shaped Depression-era California—for example, there are more lines to be drawn between the popular dance and gospel music played by Native women (p.91-92) and the emerging national hubs of San Francisco's Fremont and Oakland's Seventh Street clubs back through the Central Valley to Southern California's booming "Western Swing" scene (see La Chappelle 2007) to the collapse of Tijuana's less-racially-restricted border town nightlife.

In a similar vein, Sine has understandably focused on progressive "rebel imaginaries" that grew out of California during the Great Depression, but lurking throughout her analysis are also the seeds of far-right politics, culture and systems that undercut many of her subjects and set the state on a path to a much less progressive trajectory. As a growing number of geographers are

turning to studies of far-right politics in the contemporary moment, a project such as Sine's focused on the right-wing imaginaries of Californians could be immensely instructive.

Rebel Imaginaries is unequivocally not a book about the New Deal, and it need not be: other historians have already filled libraries debating the legacy of those policies and will continue to do so, I'm sure. That being said, the New Deal is also an unavoidable part of Depression-era life, culture and politics in California and Sine does engage its influence in electoral politics, the arts, and, briefly, the Indian Reorganization Action (often referred to as the "Indian New Deal"). There is much to be said about the unintended shortcomings and malicious subversions of the New Deal—indeed, Sine could have gone much further on the extreme harm caused by the Wagner Act excluding agricultural laborers—but the book leaves little space to explore where it succeeded as a radical project. The emphasis falls on ambivalent responses to how state actors asserted control in different moments, and misses how many New Deal policies were, at their core, a complex set of changing funding mechanisms that both shared in and challenged what constituted an autonomous and dignified future for Californians. Subsequently, at times the book underestimates the impact of New Deal programs on California, which received some of the highest funding per capita of any state, spread across urban and rural spaces, and alleviated significant misery (see the Living New Deal project: <https://livingnewdeal.org/>).

As I finish reading *Rebel Imaginaries*, California is experiencing yet another wave of record-breaking heatwaves, causing disproportionate harm to working-class communities, who are, in turn, already on the losing end of the state's spiraling inequality. At the same time, California's mainstream politics remain markedly to the Left of much of the United States, while falling far short of the radical (and necessary) demands to change everything that continually emerge from every corner of the state. Without over-extending the parallels to our present moment, the book feels unfortunately timely. Critical scholars, the mass media and policy makers ignore the imaginaries of better futures—whether present in the daily lives of everyday people or made visible by contemporary environmental and abolitionist movements that refuse narrow categories of "politics"—at our own peril.

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