3-28

Dear Ellie,

I'm told to send you a copy of these preliminary notes - I hope they meet with your approval? In any case, I'm excited for the coming season.

Until then...

In haste,

My best,

[Signature]
JUDITH SEALANDER

Preliminary notes on "Redefining the Public Sphere"

I no longer remember whether I chose or Guy Alchon assigned me the topic: "REDEFINING THE PUBLIC SPHERE." This memory lapse is convenient. Upon further reflection I am certain that I cannot do justice in the few minutes allotted me to the contributions Ellis Hawley has made to scholarly debate about the complex ways in which early twentieth century American society remade itself in part by reshaping its definitions of public and private. Luckily, I feel sure this audience possesses an historiographical sophistication not as common among the unwashed who chose to attend other sessions. Therefore, I propose the following: the best way to honor Ellis is to mimic him. Rather than review with you the ever increasing literature about divisions and intersections between public and private in American history, I shall raise several questions about it.

QUESTION ONE:

HAVE WE OVEREMPHASIZED "AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?"

Several decades ago, when Ellis Hawley was still a voice in the wilderness, few scholars asked what was peculiar about the American divisions between public and private power. By the mid-nineties, a small army of political scientists, sociologists, and historians has unveiled descriptions of the different paths taken by the American state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In most, a given emerges. Quite in contrast to their European counterparts, American expansions of public responsibility involved alliances with quasi-official advisory organizations, neither entirely public nor private. Whether the discussion involves public responsibility for care of the old, aid to injured workers and dependent children, or any number of other topics, the assumption is there. The American state is exceptional. How to explain it? Pre-occupied with this search for answers to a common question, have we ignored others equally
interesting? Indeed, in what ways have the American examples of public-private alliance NOT been so entirely unique? Douglas Ashford, for instance, has outlined the growth in nineteenth and twentieth century France of the MUTUALITÉS, a complex system of private mutual savings funds, that he judges a crucial component of the French public national health insurance system.

(Douglas Ashford, BRITISH DOGMATISM AND FRENCH PRAGMATISM: CENTER-LOCAL RELATIONS IN THE WELFARE STATE (London, 1982)

QUESTION TWO:
DO WE NEED TO REMIND OURSELVES THAT THE AMERICAN STATE IS FEDERAL?

As editors of a wonderfully rich collection of essays that appeared in 1992, Olivier Zunz and David Ward did not address openly the question just asked. Instead, in THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERNITY, historians, political scientists, and architects focus on New York City as the prototypical modern city. What struck me, as I browse through discussions of urban electrification, the 1916 set-back zoning innovations that produced the Empire State Building, and early twentieth century transportation schemes was a pattern. Decisions about divisions between public and private have occurred first at a local, state, and regional level far more often than current scholarship reflects. The associative state did not exist only at the national level. Shelves now groan under the weight of studies that document the expansion of public responsibility at the national level. Questions about parallel or different developments at sub-national levels remain less explored.

Does our focus on the expanding public sphere that found its center in Washington, D.C. distort explanations for some specific historical developments? Theda Skocpol’s new book, PROTECTING SOLDIERS AND MOTHERS, has sparked well-deserved attention. It argues, among other things, that long before the
arrival of the New Deal, Civil War pensions for Union soldiers provided "America's first large-scale nationally funded old age and disability system." (PROTECTING SOLDIERS AND MOTHERS: THE POLITICAL ORIGINS OF SOCIAL POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES (Boston, 1992): 1) Other critics have challenged the use of the term "large-scale" to describe a pension program that provided benefits for a tiny percentage of the country's population. (See Kathleen McCarthy in the December 1993 REVIEWS IN AMERICAN HISTORY, 667). What interests me is that even Skopol's critics follow her lead in their parallel focus on the national. Could not the expansion of public responsibility for elderly former soldiers be seen, at least in part, as a form of regional revenge exacted by the victorious North? Only Union army veterans received federal pensions.

Similarly, the early twentieth century mothers' pensions identified by Skopol as the other major root of a significantly expanded American welfare state were never a cohesive national phenomenon. Yes, between 1911 and 1935 the vast majority of states provided needy mothers and their children with some type of public pension. However, the terms of support and means of administration differed wildly, often even within states, sometimes within counties.

Otis Graham has illustrated, more clearly than has Skopol, the importance of attention to definitions of public activity below the national level. LOSING TIME, his recent study of the history of American industrial policy (New York, 1992) notes that scholars have focused on federal interventions to promote certain kinds of economic activity. Nonetheless, as early as the 1820s, states were expanding and re-defining their public "spheres." One of the most successful of nineteenth century construction projects, the Erie Canal, was not a product of private enterprise. It was funded by the New York State Legislature. (LOSING TIME: 78-80).

Has our focus on the national, moreover, led us to mythologize a too-orderly
division between public and private, tied to chronology? Has it led us to exaggerate the "heartless" invasion of the public into previously private "havens" of private, especially family, responsibility? In recent weeks, I have had cause to re-read, and thus accidentally pair, two case studies of survival tactics used by poor families. The first, by historian Michael Katz, used New York Charity Organization Society records to examine the income sources of an Irish immigrant widow and her children between 1918 and 1923. The second, by sociologists Kathryn Edin and Christopher Jencks, profiled the financial strategies of fifty welfare mothers in Illinois between 1988 and 1990. The two studies provide striking parallels. For both Katz's newly widowed Irish woman from County Mayo and Jencks' long-time black residents of Chicago projects welfare existed as a haphazardly coordinated network of aid that could not accurately be described as entirely public or entirely private. In 1918, Delia Kennedy received a mother's pension from the state of New York. Help also came at times from the Roman Catholic Church, the New York City Charity Organization Society, the publicly-funded New York City Free Milk Station, and several relatives. When not too sick, Kennedy worked in violation of the terms of her pension, as a part-time maid. Key to her survival was the fact that she kept one source of aid from full knowledge of help received from others. Similarity to this pattern, not difference, characterized the income strategies of every one of the fifty welfare recipients in the Edin-Jencks' study. All supplemented welfare payments illegally with off-book jobs and secret money-making activities. Just as had Mrs. Kennedy, they did not report help from friends and relatives. (Christopher Jencks, RETHINKING SOCIAL POLICY: RACE, POVERTY, AND THE UNDERCLASS (Cambridge, Ma., 1992); Michael Katz, "The History of an Impudent Poor Woman in New York City from 1918 to 1923," in Peter Mandler, Ed., THE USES OF CHARITY (Philadelphia, 1990). Scholar after scholar has described the growth of an American welfare state in the twentieth century, as a transfer of private responsibilities to the public sphere - and an entrenchment of power at the national level. If the "welfare mess" illustrates a re-defined public sphere,
what in fact should we see?

**QUESTION THREE:**

COULD THE TOPIC "A RE-DEFINED PUBLIC SPHERE" PROMOTE NEEDED DISCUSSION BETWEEN THE NOW ODDLY DIVIDED CAMPS OF POLITICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORIANS?

In the most recent issue of the *JOURNAL OF POLICY HISTORY* (1993: 5:4, 499) political scientist Aaron Wildavsky argued, "Asking why the United States is not like some other place has about run out of steam. It is time... to begin asking why America was the way it was, and, to some extent, still is." In fact, Ellis Hawley has been asking elegant versions of the latter question for over twenty five years. His studies of America during the New Era and the New Deal have caused many to see the period as one of complicated transition, when society's definitions of what was public and what was private were uniquely in flux. He has greatly influenced the group of scholars often labeled organizational historians for whom a central question has been: "How did the modern corporation affect American society?" Oversimplified, an answer has been: "Business elites, together with government allies, re-shaped the public sphere to parallel institutional models created by the new hierarchical corporations."

Political historians interested in the same period have not generally, at least publicly, paid the same debts of gratitude to Ellis Hawley. Perhaps they should. Many analyze the twentieth century decline of major political parties and, at least implicitly, agree with organizational historians that the re-defined public sphere shaped by business models helped doom vibrant political parties. Most judge the largely implied corporate influence harshly. Joel Silbey recently epitomized this approach when he roundly condemned Progressive business elites and other "reformers" and "their modern allies from Jimmy Carter to Ross
Perot* as "wrongheaded": fools who abandoned and weakened one of the nation's most democratic institutions in favor of misplaced faith in organization, experts, and business example. (JOURNAL OF POLICY HISTORY, 1993: 5, 4: 476)

If both groups re-read Ellis Hawley's sophisticated books about Herbert Hoover they might begin to wonder whether they have been concentrating on the wrong questions. Rather than chronicling the rise of the administrative expert or the fall of the pol, they might ask the question Hawley continually asks about the New Era: "Who exercises power and to what ends?" They might begin to emphasize the confusion rather than just the power of the new national corporations. They might understand that political power even within political parties might have been exercised by those who played shadow roles.

One topic neglected by both organizational and political historians to date has been the role of women in re-shaping the American public sphere. Both should follow the lead of a stalwart few led by Paula Baker and Michael McGerr. Is it possible that the idea of the woman's vote was more powerful than its reality? Could organized women's groups have exercised a more influential role as advocates of expanded public responsibility for education, health care, and aid to the poor as political forces shaping party programs from without, during a century when women could not vote, than they did after 1920? What if the thousands of active female anti-suffragists were actually right? What would that lead both political and organizational historians to conclude about power and the public sphere? (I am influenced especially by Paula Baker's THE MORAL FRAMEWORK OF PUBLIC LIFE: GENDER, POLITICS, AND THE STATE IN RURAL NEW YORK, 1870-1930 (New York, 1992) and by Michael McGerr's "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830-1930," JOURNAL OF AMERICAN HISTORY 77 (1990): 864-85.)
QUESTION FOUR:
HAS OUR SEARCH FOR A RE-DEFINED PUBLIC REALM BECOME WAYLAID BY THE LURE OF THEORY?

When sociologist Jill Quadagno sought to analyze the American expansion of publicly sponsored programs for the aged since the mid-nineteenth century, she turned first to "the vast theoretical literature on the welfare state" to find "... the factors that might have shaped American programs." (THE TRANSFORMATION OF OLD AGE SECURITY: CLASS AND POLITICS IN THE AMERICAN WELFARE STATE (Chicago, 1988: ix)) Historians have much to learn from our colleagues in other disciplines. Theoretical frameworks of state-building provide models historians should examine. But have they become a Calypso? Are we sitting besotted: delaying return to our essential journey? Are we forgetting the inherent, anti-theoretical, untidy nature of human history?

Once again, perhaps we should re-read Ellis Hawley? I've arbitrarily chosen one example. The structure of the New Deal state has inspired almost frenetic theory-making. Hawley's conclusion is that a close look reveals a government no one model can accurately describe. In some ways, the New Deal was a "business commonwealth": government in harness with private sector elites. In some ways, the New Deal was a "populist" state: government acting to protect citizens from the worst excesses of corporate power. In some ways, the New Deal was a "broker state": government as mediator between many interest groups. In no way could one theoretical framework predict its actions.

Perhaps our best contribution to a multi-disciplinary debate about the public sphere would be to undertake the sometimes unpleasant task of reminding all participants that theory can blind as well as inspire? Have we not an example in Herbert Hoover himself of the prison unreasonable devotion to theory can build?
QUESTION FIVE:

IN OUR ATTEMPTS TO UNDERSTAND THE RE-SHAPED PUBLIC SPHERE OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA HAVE WE PAID TOO LITTLE ATTENTION TO NON-ECONOMIC MOTIVATION?

Ellis Hawley, in good company with my prominent fellow panelists, has convincingly portrayed late nineteenth and early twentieth century America as a transitional period. Pressed by the emergence of a national corporate-dominated economy, business and government elites reconstructed traditional definitions of public institutions and public responsibility.

With the solid underpinning of their work, which naturally emphasizes economic motivation, can we now look again at the period with a larger focus? These decades were ones of unbelievable optimism and searing despair. We've used the word "efficiency" and the phrase "search for order" to good effect to describe them. We've used the word, "faith" too little. (Here I'm influenced by Robert Crunden, MINISTERS OF REFORM (New York, 1982) and David Danbom, "THE WORLD OF HOPE": PROGRESSIVES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR AN ETHICAL LIFE (Philadelphia, 1987).

Indeed, those who expanded the public realm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century searched for order. They also searched for justice. For many, the common good, even a common society, could no longer be upheld through private institutions alone. Predictably, Progressives found order more easily attained than justice. Has that fact, coupled with the great, and warranted, cynicism that now surrounds phrases like "public service" and "public stewardship" led us to patronize genuine moral impulse? Herbert Hoover, Herbert Croly, Woodrow Wilson and a host of others really did believe in the
possibilities of civic virtue.

Moreover, Progressive notions of a largely shared universe of moral assumptions may in fact contain more truth than historians acknowledge. They may not espouse openly class-based theories of history, but many, maybe most, historians seem to have accepted the notion of elites in conflict with commoners as a paradigm for late nineteenth, early twentieth century America. Only a fool would wish to return to unvarnished Whig interpretations of an America with equal opportunity for all. However, in searching for tribes, and communities, and nations within the nation, have we exaggerated class division?

Clearly, economic conflict, fierce and often violent, marked the age. We all know the material benefits of industrialization were not evenly shared. In stating these facts, however, have we over-emphasized intellectual conflict as well? A growing body of scholarship now shares a common thesis. Elites used their control of the expanded public sphere to impose their moral values on those less advantaged. Nicos Poulantzas summarized the views of many when he wrote, "... the state is OBJECTIVELY bourgeois and DEFINITIONALLY committed to maintaining those values." (quoted in Linda Gordon, "The New Feminist Scholarship on the Welfare State," in: Linda Gordon, Ed., WOMEN, THE STATE, AND WELFARE (Wisconsin, 1990): 16.) Within such a theoretical framework, examples abound. Only worthy widows: chaste, thrifty, and God-fearing, should receive mothers' pensions. Only young criminals willing to train for a useful trade should enter "reform" schools.

But perhaps common culture, just as much as class control, helps explain re-definitions and expansions of the American public sphere? Perhaps America never gave socialism more than a nod because its commoners as well as its elites were enthusiastic capitalists? Perhaps its commoners as well as its elites shared ideas of the unworthy and worthy poor? Perhaps average workers never
wanted their governments to expand the public sphere to provide state-backed guarantees of full employment? David Beito’s very interesting work-in-progress on the history of fraternal societies as providers of social services in early twentieth century America suggests that the answers to the above questions may be: “yes”. (David Beito, "Mutual Aid, State Welfare, and Organized Charity: Fraternal Societies and the "Deserving" and "Undeserving" Poor, 1900-1930," JOURNAL OF POLICY HISTORY, 1993, 5:4: 419-430.)

The answer may be “no” as well. Our purpose here today is to honor Ellis Hawley. One further way to do so may be to continue asking these and other questions. Whatever we ask, however, should be informed by the spirit of intelligent skepticism that suffuses Hawley’s work. For years now I’ve kept a scrap of paper on my office bulletin board with a sentence copied from one of Ellis’ essays on the New Deal. "Remember," it says, "...the degree to which reality does not correspond to the received picture." (Ellis Hawley, "The New Deal State and the Anti-Bureaucratic Tradition," in Robert Eden, THE NEW DEAL AND ITS LEGACY (Westport, Ct.: 1989): 89.