

When Movements Matter: The Townsend Plan and the Rise of Social Security. By *Edwin Amenta*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. viii + 322 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-691-12473-6.

Reviewed by W. Elliot Brownlee

The “Townsend Plan” was shorthand for a movement to call on the federal government to use the proceeds of an earmarked national sales tax to provide—as its originator, Dr. Francis E. Townsend, proposed in 1933—a uniform pension of \$150 a month (more than the median monthly income for a family) to all Americans who were over sixty years of age and agreed to spend the money by the end of the month. By the end of 1934, about 1,000 Townsend clubs had formed, largely in California and the West, to advance this proposal. Something approaching 150,000 Americans had joined, and about 1 million had signed petitions calling for its adoption. The very next year, Congress enacted the Social Security Act. Historians, however, have tended to downplay the influence of the Townsend Plan in shaping the legislation. They have often focused on the inept way the leaders of the movement squandered their potential influence by challenging the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt and consequently marginalizing themselves in the legislative process. And historians have recognized that in 1935, and later, the federal government failed to adopt social provision along the lines of the Townsend Plan. Instead, according to the most influential accounts, experts and political entrepreneurs within the federal government caught the wave of the future by embracing an insurance rationale—tentatively in 1935, through creation of the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance (OASI) program, and decisively in 1950, with the Social Security Act Amendments of that year.

Edwin Amenta tells a rather different story in *When Movements Matter*. The plan’s influence, he argues, was considerable from the time of the debates over the Social Security Act of 1935 through the amendments of 1950. Amenta agrees that the Townsend leadership showed early ineptitude in 1935, but he points out that, even then, as well as “at key points” later on, the Townsend Plan and, more generally, the pension movement

“induced” the federal government “to attend to old-age policy” (p. 239), particularly through the expansion of a federal–state matching program (Old Age Assistance, or OAA). Leadership within the federal government, particularly within the Committee on Economic Security, the Social Security Board, and the Social Security Administration, was important, to be sure, but Amenta directs attention, instead, to a long process, extending from 1934 to 1950, of interaction between “a sustained coalition of pro-spending forces in the White House and Congress and a persistent mobilization around old age” (p. 240). Both were important. Otherwise, he states, “U.S. social policy would have been even less extensive and certainly less focused on old age than it is today” (p. 240).

The most striking portion of Amenta’s history is his interpretation of the post-1935 period. By 1938, he argues, the reorganized leadership of the Townsend Plan had won new members, improved its political tactics, and gained new influence. Most dramatically, Amenta claims that, in 1941, “the Townsend Plan and the pension movement” came “within a whisker of creating senior citizens’ pensions” (p. 200). At this juncture, Amenta connects the growing popularity of the Townsend movement with the following events: inclusion of a flat old-age pension in the Democratic platform of 1940; President Franklin Roosevelt’s incorporation of that issue in his campaign, which he described as a referendum on the New Deal; the recommendation of a special Senate committee to call for a monthly pension of at least \$30 for almost all Americans over sixty years of age; and widespread expectations, in late 1941, that the Senate Finance Committee in 1942 would report out a bill favoring uniform national pensions funded, perhaps, by progressive income taxation (which the Townsend movement now favored). But, on December 7, “the war preempted the political agenda” (p. 200). The moment for radical reform had passed. After the war, the return to high employment, preoccupation with veterans’ benefits, and a Republican resurgence weakened interest in uniform pensions. But the Townsend Plan still had an impact, helping to strengthen OASI in 1950 through its earlier contributions to the pension movement.

On one level, Amenta offers innovative historical sociology. He pushes into the neglected subject of the consequences of social movements to identify “when movements matter,” and he does so in a way that enhances social theory. His most important

methodological contribution is to develop what he describes as “a political mediation theory of social movement consequences” (p. 14). He proposes a systematic analysis of the matrix of interactions—both real and hypothetical—between the strategies of social movements (which he refers to as “challengers”) and different political contexts. He applies this matrix to the history of the Townsend Plan, comparing actual strategies and political settings with counterfactual possibilities. While it is true that the best histories of social movements have undertaken the same kind of analysis without the self-conscious theorizing, Amenta’s theoretical apparatus helps him do so with exceptional thoroughness.

On another level, Amenta excels in applying the tools of the traditional historian. He has exhaustively mined all the pertinent archives and other primary sources associated with the Townsend Plan. And, he writes historical narrative with grace and clarity. The reader with a distaste for sociological analyses can vault over them and pick up a narrative, written with an acute sense of drama and irony, on the significance of human actors (often fallible) and the play of the unexpected. But, in skipping the sociology, the traditional historian ought to keep in mind that the force of Amenta’s narrative results in large part from his conceptual framework.

Amenta does not necessarily have the last word. There is plenty of room for future disagreement over the relative contributions of the Townsend Plan, in particular, and the pension movement, in general, to the development of social insurance. And historians have more work to do both to uncover the part played by corporations in steering the nation away from uniform pensions and to elucidate the concerns that existed in various quarters over tax issues. But *When Movements Matter* should fundamentally change the way we think about the formative years of modern social insurance in the United States.

In sum, the combination of theoretical creativity and scrupulous care in traditional methodology has enabled Amenta to write with a fine-grained attention to institutional conditions and historical contingency. The result is the best history we have of both the Townsend Plan and the pension movement from the Great Depression to 1950. More generally, it is one of the finest accounts to date of any movement of “challengers” over a long era of economic and political turbulence.

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