

***Measuring America: How Economic Growth Came to Define American Greatness in the Late Twentieth Century* by Andrew L. Yarrow. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010. 272 pp. Cloth \$80.00. Paper \$26.95.**

In *History of Political Economy*, v.44 (4), 2012: 715-717

The sight of economists in magazine and newspaper features, radio commentaries and TV debates no longer surprises anyone. Andrew Yarrow, historian and advocate, reminds us that it was not always so. *Measuring America* tells two interlocking stories of “how economic ideas came to have vastly greater influence on American culture and how these ideas dovetailed with an outlook expressed by opinion-shaping elites that the meaning and value of the United States increasingly resided in its growing, quantifiable abundance.” (p. 3) The clearest exposition of Yarrow's thesis comes when he examines high school history textbooks of the 1950s in chapter six, and shows how a grand narrative of philosophical and moral principles traced to the Founding Fathers was set aside to praise a more recent economic revolution and to imagine America defined by material plenty. Resonating with the classic contribution of Benedict Anderson (1983) on nations as “imagined community”, Yarrow offers us an imagined communion of affluence as a core theme in the 1950s and 1960s public sphere.

Each of the book's chapters is devoted to different media where the economic national identity was inscribed. Yarrow begins by highlighting the significance of the Employment Act of 1946, with the creation of the Council of Economic Advisers, and the Joint Economic Committee, staffed with economists as learned in scholarship as they were savvy in publicity. These early chapters are a good companion to Michael Bernstein's (2001) *Perilous Progress* or the exquisite studies of William Barber, who examine the halls of government but don't follow its soundings to the mass public. The middle of the book examines business efforts to educate the public about American capitalism. Magazines and newspapers, prominently *Fortune*, also join in the cheerleading and record keeping of affluence. The principal characters are organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers, the Council for Economic Development, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Advertising Council. Celebration of American entrepreneurship becomes Cold War propaganda in chapter five, with a review of the publications of the State Department's Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs and the United States Information Agency. They sold the wonders and envy of American living to the world, principally to the Soviet Union.

At the end, from page 178, the book's tone turns partisan. Yarrow in a few pages leaps through the 1970s, 80s, 90s and most of 00s to force a topical conclusion. He charges neoliberalism of “not only reject[ing] government economic intervention but also, by stealth, the postwar consensus that the purpose of economic growth was to raise living standards for all.” He then argues that a new social contract needs to be written where macroeconomic growth together with income redistribution, and cultural values become a metric of America's self-evaluation.

I look forward to citing this volume in numerous occasions: “that in the immediate postwar the assumptions of the Depression era still reigned, America was a mature economy that would soon fall into a new Depression (Yarrow 2010)”; that “economists, businessmen, politicians and journalists joined hands and writings in the Cold War to argue that only America's “people's capitalism” could offer the classless well-being that socialism promised (Yarrow 2010)” or briefly that “coverage of the economy and economics exploded in the 1950s (Yarrow 2010)”.

The book joins a literature that examines how the social sciences have reshaped America's self-understanding, and in assessing it merits one must turn to that body of work. Although the title and much of the book refers to metrics, the reader is left guessing what these metrics might be, and the period had plenty on offer: barometers, pictograms, statistics, graphs, and more. The mentions of national income accounting that open the volume do not visit the well-documented debates that

divided its progeny, a story that would have helped build Yarrow's case about the narrowness of material economicism (the only criticism of this kind is a statement by Kennedy that pollution increases GDP). Other works are more accomplished in showing the political and social implications of metrics (for instance Didier 2009). Secondly, Yarrow makes economics more cohesive than it ever was. While I would accept that this silence is a valid authorial choice, Yarrow also makes economics more appreciated than it ever was, and this has consequences for the claim that America was fascinated by economists. For example, he quotes as a compliment a *Business Week* article reporting on the American Economic Association Meetings, titled “7,000 Ways to Cure the Economy”. The article contains enthusiasm, but also irony at economists' lack of consensus: one prescription per economist. Finally, for a book about identity, “a vision of America's meaning and purpose that linked free enterprise, abundance, freedom, and American exceptionalism” (p. 89), there is one worrying omission: the public is never permitted to speak. One might contrast the volume with Sarah Igo's (2008) *The Averaged American*, where she reports on the letters of a diverse citizenry protesting or endorsing the social science representations of the Lynds' Middletown, Roper and Gallup's pools, and Kinsey's reports. When scholars purport to speak for the lives and thoughts of the public, the public often answers back. Yarrow does report on cracks to the unifying self-image but only in the counter-writings of intellectuals, of elites in conversation.

Yarrow documents Cold War representations of an economic America that was optimistic and triumphant. In the process he reveals a cast of characters, that reappear in nearly every chapter, leading multiple initiatives and organizations. They celebrate America, capitalism, and economics and they sell print. Yarrow shows that economists produce more than just knowledge.

Tiago Mata

References

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Random House.

Bernstein, Michael. 2001. *Perilous Progress*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Didier, Emmanuel. 2009. *En quoi consiste l'Amérique?* Paris: La Decouverte.

Igo, Sarah. 2008. *The Averaged American*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.