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Judith Stein, 1940–2017

[Nelson Lichtenstein](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/author/nelsonlichtenstein)  May 12, 2017



Judith Stein (CUNY)

Judith Stein was a tough and determined inspiration to multiple generations of scholars and activists. Her passing on May 8, 2017, after a decade and a half battling cancer, comes at a moment of her increasing historiographical influence—when her approach toward many of the most vexing and contentious problems in the history of U.S. politics, economy, and race may well have achieved an audience, academic and lay, more extensive than during any other time in her life.

“She managed to uphold a model of academic integrity and intellectual rigor while at the same time caring deeply for the well-being of her students and her department,” wrote longtime colleague James Oakes in a recent email. “Her criticism could be ruthlessly honest, yet it was never personal, and she was always, always, the truest and most loyal of friends. Within her diminutive frame roared a human dynamo.”

Stein graduated from Vassar College in 1960 and in 1968 she took her Ph.D. at Yale, where she worked with leading historians including John Morton Blum and C. Vann Woodward. She began teaching at the City College of New York in 1966 and spent half a century at that institution, retiring just last year as a distinguished professor. She also was a central figure in the PhD Program in History at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she trained generations of students with a combination of fierce intellectual rigor and strong personal support.

Her early work arose out of an engagement with African-American history, establishing an analytical template linking class, race, and the structure of political economy that would guide her scholarly career for many decades. In a 1974 *Science and Society* essay, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others: The Political Economy of Racism in the United States,” Stein takes issue with historians, including August Meier and Louis Harlan, who, she argues, reified the pervasive racism of the post-Reconstruction era in order to divorce it “from the concrete and complex experiences of social groups in particular circumstances.” Instead, she argued, black Americans “interacted dialectically with other workers and other social classes, which made white racism as well as African-American nationalism and integrationism plastic and contingent ideologies, embedded within the political and economic structures of which they were a part. “By reifying and isolating race consciousness and racism,” writes Stein in what today might seem a commonplace understanding, “these relationships are ignored, with the result that the function of racism in maintaining the power of the bourgeoisie is distorted, and we are led to believe that men make history according to their racial likes and dislikes.” When her first book, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society*, appeared in 1986, Stein applied these insights to a social movement whose nationalist and petit-bourgeois ideology was often in tension—creative or destructive—with the proletarian social strata that sustained it. Nathan Huggins, writing in the *American Historical Review*, judged Stein’s book “the most balanced and the most historically textured study of Garvey and his times.”

As one might expect, Judith would become a fierce critic of 1990s “whiteness studies.” Likewise, in a [2016 interview with *Jacobin*](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/06/white-working-class-new-deal-racism-reagan-democrats/), Stein offered an impassioned rejoinder to those historians and commentators who argued that the racism of the white working class first made the New Deal possible, because minorities were excluded, and then undermined its statecraft when they abandoned liberalism and social democracy in the post-1960s era. Instead Stein argued that it wasn’t the racism of white workers that forced the Democratic Party to the right on economics, but the power of political and business elites, often within the Democratic Party, who chose to abandon organized labor and turn the party of Roosevelt into the party of the Clintons.

Stein’s *Running Steel, Running America*, published in 1998, was a pioneering work that opened up the post-1960s era to the kind of scholarly inquiry that was once confined to studies of the political economy of the New Deal. She combined in one narrative an entirely fresh analysis of two most explosive phenomena. The first was the deindustrialization of the old manufacturing heartland, whose demise she linked to Cold War economic and trade policies of every presidential administration after that of Dwight D. Eisenhower. “The steel industry modernized on a terrain of quicksand,” wrote Stein. “The arrogance of U.S. policy was the notion that one could develop the industrial capacities of allies . . . and promote imports without damaging the nation’s industrial base.” An industrial policy was essential—and missing.

Second, Stein combined this overview with a meticulous history of racial politics and policymaking within the steel industry, its union, the judiciary, Congress, and the NAACP. Her argument was provocative and sharp: liberalism’s racial and economic failures in the 1960s and ‘70s were a function not of its large ambitions—“backlash” was not the problem—but of its misshapen means, which were inadequate to the task. Affirmative action in steel and elsewhere proved an exceedingly weak policy prescription, but one fetishized by too many on the left. Although morally compelling, it could not and did not save the jobs or job standards of hundreds of thousands of steel workers, either African American or white. Instead, a more coordinated, universalistic, social-democratic strategy was necessary, but Cold War ideology and politics, which sacrificed the steel industry to a militarized free-trade regime, proscribed such an effort.

*Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance* appeared in 2010 and proved another notable achievement, a project predicated on an understanding of political economy in the 1970s that incorporated both grand historical impulses, like the “legitimization crisis” that accompanied U.S. defeat in Vietnam and the profit/wage squeeze generated by a newly globalized manufacturing regime, with the contingencies of political and social life. These included the narrow Carter victory of 1976, the near-collapse of the Chrysler Corporation in 1979, and the Iranian hostage crisis that began that same year. All combined to make the 1970s a crucial decade, the dividing line between a four-decade long New Deal order and the post-Keynesian market triumphalism that has characterized the era that began with Reagan’s presidency. Such an understanding has become standard fare, but Stein was among the very first to break with the culturalist riff that saw the 1970s as merely some kind of distortion and devolution from sixties social radicalism. Instead Stein properly decenters both the Cold War and the sixties in order to recast the last seventy years of American history in terms of how and why market fundamentalism made such an extraordinarily and unexpected comeback. Her discussion of Richard Nixon’s opportunistic Keynesianism demonstrates that even conservative politicians began the decade still living in a world shaped by the New Dealers. But by the time Jimmy Carter left office—and Stein is one of the most astute scholars of his presidency—even the Democrats had difficulty conceiving of any response to the economic crisis that did not embody austerity, deregulation, and monetary fundamentalism.

Her argument rested heavily on showing the roots of the slowdown in new capital investment that American policy elites failed to reverse during the 1970s. Stagflation did not just mean slow growth and stagnant living standards: it generated a disinvestment that crippled American industry. Thus while productivity sank in the United States, the planning initiatives and regulatory programs that were far more common in the European Economic Community and Japan dramatically increased manufacturing, productivity, and exports in those countries.

Labor paid heavily for this elite program, which is why Stein devotes much attention to deconstructing the clichés and blinders with which most historians have recounted the policy prescriptions offered by the seemingly stolid AFL-CIO leadership of the 1970s. George Meany was not an attractive figure to Stein’s anti-war, anti-racist generation, or any cohort of historians who followed, but she is correct to argue that the cigar-chomping union leader and others at the top of the AFL-CIO offered an astute analysis of the new political economy. They perceived that the long-run viability of American manufacturing called for more than Keynesian stimulus; it required an industrial policy, like that of Germany, to shore up the nation’s industrial base, whether that meant modernizing older sectors or creating infrastructure and jobs in new ones. Contrary to much anti-labor ideology, from either right or left, labor officials of the 1970s were quite willing to negotiate a political and social compact that enhanced overall productivity. But capital was unwilling to deal.

At her death, Judith Stein was at work on a history of the 1990s and the relationship between globalization, neoliberalism, and domestic American politics. It is a great loss that it will never be realized.

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