

Julian Zelizer. *Governing America: The Revival of Political History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. 416pp.

Christian Wilbers<sup>1</sup>

College of William and Mary

There once was a time, writes Julian Zelizer in the introduction to this anthology of his own essays, when political history was facing a bleak future and veterans of the field “were demoralized and pessimistic.” (1) The critics of the “New Left” had successfully deconstructed older consensus school metanarratives and hagiographies of great men in America’s past were out of style. Shifting the focus from the country’s leaders to its people and from the top to the bottom, social and cultural historians had revolutionised academia. It seemed neither academics nor the public were interested in the work of esteemed scholars of political history anymore and young graduate students like Zelizer himself felt anxious about their own professional futures.

Frequent visitors of American bookstores today know that the angst of that time, the mid-1990s, has long gone. The past two decades have brought a resurgence in the field and authors like Doris Kearns Goodwin, Jon Meacham, and Robert Caro top bestseller lists

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Wilbers is a PhD Candidate and is currently working on a project exploring issues of race, gender, mass consumerism and identity among German-American immigrant culture. He can be reached at [cawilbers@email.wm.edu](mailto:cawilbers@email.wm.edu).

and tour TV studios with their presidential biographies. Zelizer himself has, of course, taken on an active role in the renewal of political history and this anthology is a retrospective view of a decade and a half of scholarly achievement. The first of four parts is a collection of Zelizer's essays on the historiography of the field; the next three discuss fiscal challenges, the political process, and national security, respectively.

Though many scholars will doubtlessly be familiar with either the essays themselves or the arguments made therein, Zelizer's work merits renewed attention. The chapter on the history of American Conservatism, for example, recalls the continuing ability of the Republican Party to unite fragmented, heterogeneous groups of Americans around one political platform. For those wondering about the possible end of Conservatism in the United States,<sup>1</sup> the essay is a useful reminder of its dialectical, mutually constitutive relationship with Liberalism. The issues, after all, will hardly go away. The ability and authority of the government to levy taxes, for example, is an ideological fault line that continues to divide U.S. society – and the focus of the second part of the book. By devoting separate chapters to Social Security, Medicare, and the New Deal, Zelizer tackles topics that will likely be at the centre of American public discourse for years to come. Fiscal conservatives will always find good reason to argue against the expansion, or even the preservation of government-sponsored programs. And while historians often focus on racial and social arguments made for or against these programs, Zelizer maintains that more time should be devoted to fiscal policy and political economy – or,

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<sup>1</sup> See Kim Phillips-Fein, "Right On," *Nation*, September 9, 2009 <http://www.thenation.com/article/right> (retrieved: December 10, 2012). For a recent example, see: Maureen Dowd, "A Lost Civilization," *New York Times*, December 8, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/opinion/sunday/dowd-a-lost-civilization.html?ref=maureendowd> (retrieved: December 10, 2012).

more specifically, the “basic challenge that has confronted every president and Congress: raising sufficient revenue to pay for services.” (105)

Where there is anything amiss in this fabulous collection of essays by such a renowned and versatile scholar, it is that this reviewer found the author’s perspective somewhat narrow at times. For example, in the chapter on American Conservatism, Zelizer suggests that the Conservative movement failed to make any significant political impact even at its height during the 1980s. When in power, Zelizer argues, Conservatives found it difficult to implement the policy changes they desired, for example in the reduction of the welfare state or national security. “The election of Republicans turned out to be different than the wholesale triumph of conservative politics and ideas. Conservatives in positions of governance had to contend with the durability of public policy.” (75) While his assessment is certainly correct, Zelizer misses the lasting impact of Conservative ideology, most importantly in slowing down the implementation of social policies, which have all but become the norm elsewhere – universal health care being only the most prominent of many examples.

Of course, this is cultural criticism of a political analysis and Zelizer himself would likely (and correctly) point this reviewer to the third part of his book, “The Politics of Process.” Here, the author tackles issues such as congressional reform and campaign finance and underlines once more why knowledge of the political process should matter to cultural and social historians. Without such knowledge, after all, it is hard to comprehend even the most basic trends in American politics and the challenges faced by its leaders, left or right, in “Governing America.”