The Emotional Life of the Great Depression, by John Marsh, New York City, Oxford University Press, 2019, 307 pp., £35.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-19-884773-1

By Oliver Ayers, NCH London.

John Marsh begins this eclectic survey of the Great Depression’s ‘emotional life’ with the arresting experiences of Lorena Hickok, a former journalist tasked by the New Deal administration to take the nation’s figurative pulse in the tumultuous winter of 1933– 1934. For Hickok and New Dealers like Harry Hopkins, assessments of the impact of innumerable policy initiatives needed to go beyond economic statistics to try to assess how people felt in the raw, about their personal predicaments and governmental attempts to ameliorate them. For Marsh too, policy and econometric-driven studies of the era miss out a key dynamic of what made the nation tick: feelings and emotions. This, it is argued, mattered then and now, and Marsh is also keen to emphasize the importance of the grim experiences of the 1930s to the long-range American historical experience.

To make this case, the book works hard to the blend the familiar and unfamiliar. For instance, one is entirely unsurprised to see attention given to The Grapes of Wrath, but here it is dealt with as part of a wider treatment of the notion of awe and the sublime, examined in a chapter that also covers reactions to astronomical discoveries and the construction of the Empire State Building. The idea that the novel was part of a ‘downward’ form of the sublime that orientated the experience of labouring folk is a provocative one, an example of the many ways in which the book tries to go beyond familiar feelings of fear and despair – what Marsh calls the ‘ur-emotional texts’ of the decade – to reveal a wider range of experiences that both complement and compete with the more familiar. The inclusion of the well-known tale of the panic induced by H.G. Wells’s radio adaptation of War of the Worlds is a similar case in point. Here, for example, reactions to the play are considered as part of the wider enquiries undertaken during the decade by sociologists and psychologists to discover the causes and structure of societal panic – conceived as a vital task in the midst of an economic crisis precipitated at least in part by events on Wall Street in 1929.

As part of this approach, the book includes chapters on fear and panic as well as examinations of awe, hope and love. The discussion of righteousness, meanwhile, provides an important demonstration of the pervasiveness of this emotion across the political range. Accordingly, the righteous political stylings of certain New Dealers are examined alongside those of the radical left and Christian evangelicals, while even ‘do nothing’ Republican bogeymen like Andrew Mellon are brought into the frame. As Marsh demonstrates persuasively, even doing nothing was doing something for these individuals, convinced as they were that unnecessary government intervention would exacerbate the crisis. It is an important point that the doctrine of laissez-faire capitalism associated with this approach was built on emotive as well as economic foundations: the American nation, so the argument went, needed an adjustment of both market values and moral ones.

Readers will no doubt be more or less convinced by the specific readings of the myriad case studies deployed in the book, but overall the commingling of such a variety of culturalist readings with the canonical experiences of the Great Depression is effective. This is especially apparent in the book’s culmination with the story behind the passage of the Social Security Act, read as a pivotal episode in reframing the relationship between citizen and state. This story also, in the process, reinforces Marsh’s central claim about the interrelationships between matters of emotion and political economy. Similarly, the eclecticism of the material presented might disorientate some readers, but overall the blend between close reading and wider context works effectively to help the reader navigate the discussion. A fuller, separate conclusion would, however, have helped round off the book’s central arguments, especially given the broad sweep of evidential ground covered.

Despite the book’s success in broadening our understanding of the emotional range of the Depression decade, less attention is paid to the diversity of experiences of citizens across the country. Marsh rightly recognizes the importance of this theme at the outset – noting that some people’s emotions mattered more than those of others in the period, according to ethno-racial and gendered stratifications – but African Americans’ experiences and questions of race more broadly feel like underdeveloped themes. There is some useful discussion of Richard Wright’s Native Son, and Langston Hughes is afforded a walk-on part, but delving into the voluminous reportage of the black press could have offered one of several available routes to explore the diversity of emotional experience in more depth. One hopes that other scholars will pursue research in these directions, because there is fulsome evidence in this wide-ranging and enjoyable book that questions of emotion are not mere ephemeral concerns: instead, they constitute an integral part of the ‘glue’ that drove history forward during the transformative years of the Great Depression