

The Iconoclastic Imagination: Image, Catastrophe, and Economy in America from the Kennedy Assassination to September 11. By Ned O'Gorman. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xvi, 251 pp. Cloth, \$90.00, Paper, \$32.50.)

This is a frustrating book. Ned O'Gorman offers a careful and sometimes-brilliant critical analysis of significant events in U.S. history—the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the space shuttle *Challenger* disaster, and the attacks of September 11, 2001—and recontextualizes them in politically productive ways. At the same time, however, he presents a series of dense theoretical arguments about neoliberalism and iconoclasm, and the relationship between the two, which I found hard going. The author notes that the book is a series of essays, and it may be that some frustration was created by his attempt to impose unity where none existed. Either way, much is of value here, but it is occasionally hidden by theoretical exposition—better illustrated by the author's examples than when it is presented in abstract.

At the heart of the book is a set of claims of about neoliberalism, a concept that is, as the author notes, “notoriously fuzzy” (p. xiii). He is to be congratulated for offering a genealogy of the term and, in so doing, capturing its function as a social imaginary that shapes our understanding of the world even as it often remains invisible. The account, in chapter 6, of the ways economics came to replace politics in the structuring of American foreign policy is especially useful, expanding upon and adding depth and nuance to Hannah Arendt's claims about how the properly prepolitical has come to dominate the public sphere. Tellingly, this chapter is closest to a traditional history; it illuminates and is illuminated by the book's broader claims about neoliberalism. The same can be said for the three case studies that make up the book's narrative core.

In these sections O'Gorman tenaciously explores and makes plausible his claim that with the rise of neoliberalism, and the concomitant impossibility of any image representing the United States in its entirety, the only way for national and international publics to see America is through the destruction of its icons.

The flow of the argument is somewhat interrupted by the author's attempt to trace the importance of iconography back to the Byzantine Empire—a claim that, while interesting, does little to enhance his reading of the destruction of American images. The great strength of the book is, nevertheless, the way O'Gorman transfigures the commonplace, representing these well-known events through the lens of his arguments to establish their generative function in the neoliberal social imaginary.

Books may be frustrating because (to paraphrase Gertrude Stein) “there is no there there.” Here, the problem is sometimes the opposite, with too much there there. When O'Gorman gets out of his own way, *The Iconoclastic Imagination* offers fresh insights into America's self-understanding and its shaping of every aspect of our lives. I suspect that, for most readers, such insights will make the frustration worthwhile.

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