

## Book Review: Rotary International and the Selling of American Capitalism by Brendan Goff

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**Goff, Brendan. *Rotary International and the Selling of American Capitalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. viii + 401 pages.**

*Rotary International and the Selling of American Capitalism*, written by independent scholar Brendan Goff, offers a fascinating look into the origins of global capitalism by arguing that the Rotary Club helped to lay the foundations for the current economic order. Goff demonstrates that the Rotary clubs serve as an act of economic privilege and social control that often would work within the frameworks of imperial power to advance U.S. interests domestically and, most importantly, abroad. Goff further points out that the Rotary Clubs serve as newfound ways to exert United States “soft power,” specifically at a time when the United States was entering a period of Wilsonian isolationism (p. 15). The Rotary Clubs would do this through what Goff refers to as “civic internationalism” (p. 4). With ideological roots in business progressivism and cultural internationalism of the United States constituting what Goff calls their “service ideology,” the Rotary clubs were able to function as an express lane for economic opportunity in the form of global capitalism (p. 4).

The book is divided into six chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Chapters one and two establish the overall argument in the book while also highlighting struggles that the domestic chapters face in the forms of racism, sexism, and classism. Goff shines a light on Rotary Club racism by highlighting their “economic citizenship” policy to justify limiting membership to only White men (p. 37). By taking time to highlight this distinction, along with other mentions of racism towards Asians throughout the book, Goff demonstrates the inherent racism found in global capitalism. Chapters three and four serve as case studies on how individuals would establish Rotary Clubs and how they worked to further capitalism domestically and abroad. These chapters excellently advance Goff’s argument while also allowing the book to sit comfortably in the scholarship of capitalism. By focusing on the political power wielded by the Rotary Club and its

ability to be used as a form of soft power for the United States, Goff's work fits nicely alongside other similar works examining pro-business organizations seeking to preserve capital. Works such as *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* by Kim Philips-Fein and *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism 1945-60* by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf are two great examples, however, neither work goes as in-depth on the Rotary Club as Goff. A surprising number of books on pro-business organizations fails even to mention the Rotary Club, making Goff's interpretation a fresh perspective in the field, as well as a unique work that many scholars of Labor and Capitalism will want to read.

Goff's *Rotary International* is targeted primarily to an academic audience rather than a general one. Although this work will not find its way into the hands of many non-academics, it is not for lack of trying. Using easy-to-understand logic, reasoning, and vocabulary, paired with plenty of visual aids such as maps and references to pamphlets, *Rotary International* can hold a reader throughout all three hundred and some pages. Where *Rotary International* lacks, however, is nothing but room for Goff's interpretation to develop further. For example, the issues of race, gender, and classism, while present, could be expanded upon further to examine more in-depth the problems of global capitalism. While Goff clearly wants to explore these issues further, the book is packed with information as it is, and delving too deep into these issues could take away from his focus. Goff also does not critically examine the roles of other pro-business organizations and their efforts to manage capitalism's public image during the great depression. For Goff to have spent so much time discussing the public service message put forward from the Rotary Club to repair capitalism's PR image without bringing up other organizations doing the same at the time, such as The American Liberty League, seems like somewhat of an oversight. This minor complaint aside, Goff's argument is solid and should be considered by labor historians and historians of

capitalism. I would also recommend this work to any Rotarian wanting to learn more about the development history of their organization.

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