3

Value from Obligation

Thank you for a name.
Thank nobody for the same.

(GHA 206)

‘THE CAPITAL AND CAPITALS OF THE UNITED STATES’

During her visit to America in the midst of the Depression, Stein thought that the nation was demonstrating signs of becoming a mass public. Giving up on that which makes them most modern, Americans seem to have been turning towards Roosevelt and the New Deal to cure their economic and social ills. Economic crisis calls the government out of hiding, according to Stein, and alters the subjective landscape of producers: no longer do workers freely contract their labour; now they are ‘employed’. In ‘The Capital and Capitals of the United States’, Stein says that ‘[t]here is nothing that makes any one know more quickly that they are employees that is that they are employed and not on their own or a hired man than when the government is where everybody always knows about it’ (HWW 75). This goes against the grain of the American commitment to the values of classical liberalism. Americans, Stein claims, always keep their government out of sight where it can do as little harm as possible to the workings of the market. This is why American capital cities are never the big cities, but always unimportant ones: ‘the having put the capital away, just left it where nobody would notice it unless they happened to be looking for it is a very important part of what makes the country that is the people . . . ’ (HWW 74). In America, the capital is ‘tucked away’ and forgotten ‘because the country was going to be suspicious of what its capital was going to do’ (HWW 73–4). According to Stein,
There is another thing about Americans. And it has to do with the way they want their capital, do Americans have they ever felt that they were employed when they were hired. They used not to feel so. All Americans perhaps they have changed now but I hope not all Americans have always felt that they were not employed but that they were hired which is an entirely different thing. Have they been slowly changing, I have been afraid these last years that is before the depression that they were changing, that they were getting to be not like a hired man but like an employee, that is someone whom some one employs. There is a difference and this difference has always been American and now that the depression has come in a funny way they seem to be going back again, back to being a hired man and not an employed one, at least I hope so. And this has also something to do with their having wanted the capital to be tucked away where they would not know that it was going on.

According to Stein’s formulation the reappearance of ‘government’ on the subjective landscape started to take place ‘before the depression’. Unlike many classical liberals at the time, Stein saw the New Deal – the reappearance of the government – more as a symptom than a cause of the collectivist tendencies that became apparent in the thirties. It is not therefore only the New Deal that threatens the freedom of the private sector and the individual worker: this freedom was already under siege. For this reason, the Depression for Stein holds the welcome possibility of a dissolution of the emergent economic and social patterns that threaten the private life of workers: ‘perhaps now the depression will make them commence again to begin again forgetting that the government is something that any one of them can know is there all the time’ (HWW 75). Stein opposes the New Deal because, if the market were allowed to run its course into depression, employees would become hired men again, free to wander from job to job. According to the classical liberal conception, a ‘hired man’ is free by virtue of the contract implied by money wages. The Depression might once again make hired men of employees by dissolving the corporate subjective structures that interpellate them, that provide them with ‘identity’ outside of contractual exchange. But of course the Depression also calls out the capital as government. Roosevelt makes one know where