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Bruce J. Schulman

## **Comment: The Empire Strikes Back — Conservative Responses to Progressive Social Movements in the 1970s**

In 1969, former Nixon campaign analyst Kevin Phillips detected the harbingers of a seismic shift in the American body politic. After a generation of 'New Deal Democratic hegemony', punctuated by the 'Negro and urban revolutions' of the 1960s, a new era was dawning in national life. A decade later, another analyst — conservative organizer Richard Viguerie — hailed the completion of that realignment. 'The simple truth is that there is a new majority in America,' Viguerie crowed, 'and it's being led by the New Right.'<sup>1</sup>

The authors of these articles contest those assessments; they challenge the conventional portraits of 1970s America that have emerged in memoir and memory, popular culture and historical scholarship — much of it proffered by nostalgic veterans of the 1960s left. Together, these articles assail both the 'Me Decade' synthesis, the idea of the 1970s as an insignificant hiatus defined by apathy, self-indulgence, and vapid dance music, and the backlash thesis, depicting the decade as simply a conservative recoil from the perceived excesses of the 1960s. These scholars see more than the insipid fads of pet rocks and maverick gulls, and detect political developments more complicated than the collapse of liberalism and the rise of the right. Instead, these four authors paint a collective picture of grassroots action and widespread protest, of burgeoning radicalism and growing federal government involvement in the lives of ordinary citizens. From bilingual education to gay rights, the pages of *Ms. Magazine* to the streets of Tupelo, Mississippi, the decade witnessed a plethora of under-the-radar reform, much of it detached from the realm of electoral politics.

For example, Stephen Tuck disputes the notion that the African American struggle for civil rights fragmented and diluted after 1970. Instead, Tuck sees expanded, intensified, and often successful protest efforts. Rather than vitiate the energy of the movement or push it toward unproductive radicalism, the organizational and legislative triumphs of the 1960s established the foundation for broader action in workplaces, prisons, welfare offices, and small communities. Not only did African American protestors raise new issues and score important new advances, the movement also welcomed into its ranks previously marginal members of the community. The ministers, college students and male militants that had once been the face of African American

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1 Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Garden City, NY, 1970), 25; Richard Viguerie, *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, VA, 1981), 7.

protest were supplemented, and even supplanted, by feminists, welfare activists, and the imprisoned.

Simon Hall extends this argument; he maintains that the movement culture of the 1960s flourished broadly after 1970. Activists of all stripes embraced the tactics of the freedom struggles and the counterculture. Direct-action protests and guerilla theater not only defined such obvious descendants of the civil rights and women's liberation movements as the struggle for gay rights, they became the characteristic mode of action even for opponents of racial integration and legal abortion. Anti-busing activists in Boston explicitly modeled themselves on the civil rights movement and saw themselves as heirs to Martin Luther King. But 1970s protestors borrowed more than the hollow shell of their predecessors' tactics. The central ideological constructs of 1960s social movements — participatory democracy, authenticity, the personal is political — also informed grassroots struggles for gay rights and against court-ordered busing.

In his essay on second-wave feminism, Joshua Zeitz revises this thesis. The 1970s, Zeitz concurs, became the heyday for the type of grassroots activism that Hall and Tuck describe. But he attributes this development not to the continued potency of 1960s social movements, their strategies and ideas, but rather to the collapse of mainstream institutions and the failure of moderate voices. Americans 'sought radical grassroots alternatives, left and right,' he asserts, 'out of frustration with the political center.' They succeeded because the middle caved in: 'three unusually weak presidential administrations created a power vacuum at the top, leaving ordinary citizens to sort out the world at the local level.'

This consistent rejection of center explains why the same disenchanted Americans gravitated from one seemingly inexplicable position to the other, such as the Wallace voters in the 1972 Democratic primaries who turned to George McGovern as a second choice, and the working-class white males who shifted their loyalties from Ted Kennedy in the 1980 primary campaign to Ronald Reagan in the general election.<sup>2</sup> Second-wave feminism formed but one example of a larger, broader effort to construct alternatives to the public sphere and national political institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Gareth Davies arrives at the same destination from another direction. Instead of persistent grassroots agitation, Davies uncovers the ways that liberals embedded the social policies and expansive government of the Great Society into the body politic. Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a plethora of new programs at once built an expansive bureaucracy dedicated to an ever-increasing federal role in public education and created powerful constituencies for those programs. Most importantly, con-

2 Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, (New York 1974), 214.

3 Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self* (New York 1983), 9; Frances Fitzgerald, *Cities on a Hill* (New York 1987), 18–23. This argument is developed in Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies* (New York 2001), xv–xvi, *passim*.

servatives in Congress not only acquiesced in, but often championed the expansion of the programs. In this seeming repudiation of the commitment to limited government, in an area of public policy where Americans had long cherished local control, Davies finds the roots of contemporary Big-government conservatism. Davies' analysis makes sense of the ostensible contradiction of conservative Republican George W. Bush teaming with liberal Democrat Ted Kennedy to enact the No Child Left Behind Act, a law that simultaneously increased funding and strengthened federal government control over the nation's schools. 'Compassionate conservatism' emerged from the political struggles of the 1970s.

Collectively, these articles paint a compelling picture of political ferment in the 1970s — of progressive social movements, liberal interest groups, and conservative accommodations to government spending and empowered minority groups. How then might we reconcile this revised portrait with the conservative ascendancy in American electoral politics? After all, the decade culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan. The long-time champion of the conservative movement won a large majority in the Electoral College and swept in with him the first Republican-controlled Senate in decades. Among the casualties of the Reagan landslide were such icons of liberal Democrats as Frank Church and George McGovern. Reagan tallied historically high shares of the Hispanic and the Jewish vote for a GOP presidential candidate, and African Americans gave him a smaller share of their votes than any Republican since the 1930s (excepting only outspoken Civil Rights Act opponent Barry Goldwater in 1964).

A few crucial developments might resolve this paradox. First, even as a potent rebel alliance of radical protestors and liberal bureaucrats took shape during the 1970s, the empire struck back. Embattled presidents notwithstanding, establishment forces organized to repulse grassroots challenges. The Business Roundtable molded corporate CEOs into a formidable political and social force, foundations like Olin and Heritage underwrote an ideological counter-revolution to liberalism, and groups like Students in Free Enterprise rolled back the radical tide on college campuses. While the number of corporate PACS rose tenfold in the decade, pro-labor PACS remained stagnant. Not surprisingly, the Business Roundtable and its allies blocked labor-law reform, full-employment legislation, and the creation of new Department of Consumer Affairs. They also succeeded in lowering the tax on capital gains. These conservative triumphs hardly suggest the unbroken continuation of the liberal, reformist 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Second, it is no accident that three of these four articles focus on social movements. Looking back from 2007, it is clear that the grassroots struggles for racial justice and sexual equality have exerted a more thoroughgoing impact than the liberal political economy of the Great Society. To be sure,

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4 This counter-revolution is excavated in two forthcoming books: Kim Phillips-Fein, *The Great Utopia: How American Business Fought the New Deal Order* (New York 2008); and Bethany E. Moreton, *Everyday Values* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

feminist and civil rights activists would suffer many setbacks, and programs such as Medicare and federal aid to education would become enduring features of American life. But the impulses toward gender equity, minority representation, and affirmative action have proven more resilient to conservative challenge than the essential economic features of the New Deal order. Organized labor has experienced catastrophic decline since the 1970s, the real value of the minimum wage has eroded, the tax code has become decidedly more regressive, and the privatization of public services commonplace.

To some extent, this divergence testifies to the remarkable potency of the social movements themselves and to what Davies calls their 'moral grandeur'. By the 1970s, most opponents of civil rights and feminism accepted the movements' basic objectives; almost nobody openly defended white supremacy or sexual hierarchy. Many business groups, even those that most vociferously opposed federal environmental, safety, and economic regulation, embraced affirmative action. It also testifies to electoral influence of newly enfranchised and organized minority groups. By embracing bilingual education, conservative Republicans positioned themselves to win 37 per cent of the Hispanic vote in 1980.

Nonetheless, over the past three decades, the cultural agenda of these social movements — demands for recognition and representation, such as bilingual education and the celebration of the Martin Luther King holiday, and the ethic of authenticity — has proved to be more successful than their radical socio-economic objectives. (Feminism presents a somewhat more complicated example.) The welfare rights and prison uprisings of the 1970s seem almost quaint in a political landscape, where even a contemporary liberal icon such as Bill Clinton pursued conservative welfare and crime policies. The 'New Democrat' president ended the federal entitlement to welfare, supported capital punishment and rebuffed efforts to end mandatory prison time for drug offenders.

When you focus not just on the size of government, but the nature of its actions, these limits, as well as the enduring cultural influence of 1960s social movements, also point up another outgrowth of the era: straight white men responded differently to the new politics of the 1970s than did other Americans. From the 1920s through the 1970s, few differences between the sexes appeared in political affiliation and voting behavior. But in 1980, as Josh Zeitz notes, a marked divide emerged: 55 per cent of men voted for Reagan, while women narrowly favored Jimmy Carter. This 'gender gap' has remained a persistent feature of the American political landscape, and it becomes more pronounced when considering only white voters.

As historian Anthony Rotundo has shown, the gap developed because men, not women, shifted their allegiances. Women mostly remained loyal to the New Deal coalition, while men increasingly deserted the party and principles of their fathers. Why? The economic downturn and political struggles of the 1970s seemed to undermine their status and power as white men. Inflation and stagnation diminished their earning power and eroded their breadwinner status, as more and more families required two incomes to make ends meet.

Conservatives eventually succeeded in focusing white males' frustration against taxes, social programs, and what they perceived as the nation's weakness in the international arena. Disco Demolition Night may have betrayed a revolt against the center, but, like the anti-busing, pro-life, and anti-feminist movements, this grassroots uprising would quickly ally itself with established interests in the Republican Party, the churches, and the business community.<sup>5</sup>

In this light, the rise of Big-government conservatism in the 1970s constitutes a major force in American life. To be sure, the Right had long wrestled with the tensions between their ideological commitment to small government, their ambitions for power, and their concrete policy goals. From the first stirrings of the modern conservative movement after the second world war, conservatives often set aside their libertarian instincts in the service of some other objective. In the early postwar era, they embraced the national security state, championing not only a strong military but also expanded domestic surveillance and efforts to root out subversive influences from schools and workplaces. In the 1950s and 1960s, Sunbelt conservatives in both major parties cast fiscal restraint to the wind, supporting both the Apollo space program and a wide array of economic development programs. But, as Davies shows, in the 1970s some conservatives began explicitly backing away from federalism and formulating a muscular conservatism just as likely to tout aggressive government action as to condemn it.

Together, these articles contribute to an ongoing reinterpretation of the 1970s as a pivotal era in recent United States history; they make clear that the 1970s formed no mere interregnum. The era was more than a national bad hair decade. The authors also complicate the story of the conservative ascendancy. Not only did the emerging New Right contend with opposition from grassroots radicals, regulatory agencies and the courts; it operated in a political landscape permanently altered by the tactics, ideas, and experiences of the Great Society, the counterculture and 1960s activists.

Nonetheless, conservatism triumphed in the 1970s, in ways that few observers — even few dedicated conservatives — could have predicted in the late 1960s. The Right owed its success in part to the very vitality of 1960s reform efforts: drawing on their example, conservatives constructed their own grassroots organizations, developed a powerfully resonant anti-institutional, anti-bureaucratic message, and sometimes even embraced activist government as a vehicle for their political ambitions. They may not have restrained the growth of government, but they reshaped the American political agenda, derailed important liberal initiatives, and changed the direction of much national policy. At the same time, the 1970s may not have marked the eclipse of liberal social movements; indeed, the demands of various dispossessed groups for cultural recognition flourished, but their broader efforts to redistribute wealth and power largely foundered. The authors of the articles in this

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5 E. Anthony Rotundo, 'The Revolt of the Straight White Male', unpublished manuscript, courtesy of the author.

collection may be overreaching, when they conclude that 1960s social movements and political impulses not only persisted, but also 'prospered' in the 1970s.

Suggesting compelling new ways to think about this crucial era, these articles raise many searching questions about the 1970s — and about our own times.

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