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Author(s): Stephen Tuck

Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Oct., 2008), pp. 617-620

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543225>

Accessed: 31/12/2013 02:51

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Stephen Tuck

Introduction: Reconsidering the 1970s — The 1960s to a Disco Beat?

It is tempting to dismiss the 1970s in the United States as an ‘in-between’ decade. After all, the 1970s fell between two momentous decades: between the swinging sixties and the materialistic eighties; between the liberal Great Society and the conservative New Right revolution; between Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and President Reagan; between the civil rights movement and the religious right; between Vietnam and facing down the Evil Empire; between landing on the moon and the Star Wars project; between rock ‘n’ roll and rap.

Sandwiched between such dynamic eras, the 1970s stand small. The years that Tom Wolfe famously described as the ‘me decade’ seemed to run out of gas (literally, in American terminology, with long queues at the petrol pumps).¹ This was the decade of Nixon’s Watergate and Carter’s weak leadership, of an oil crisis and a hostage crisis, of economic stagflation and inner city decay, of declining voter turnout and increasing pessimism, of a backlash against bussing and affirmative action, of cringe-worthy blaxploitation movies and a short-lived disco fad.

Little wonder that, for a generation, few historians were attracted to the 1970s. Those that were tended to play down the decade’s significance. Peter Carroll’s *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (1982) sums up the genre.² The barren, self-obsessed 1970s simply confirmed that the New Deal order had well and truly fallen — the liberal consensus had unravelled, the Democratic Party had fractured, people had lost faith in big government and social movements headed into decline.³ For most historians of the United States — many of whom supported the social reforms and social engagement of the 1960s — this was proof of

The four articles in this symposium are based on papers presented at a conference on the 1970s hosted by Tony Badger at Clare College, Cambridge, in March 2007. The authors would like to thank Tony Badger, Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer for organizing the event — one of a series organized by the Boston University–Clare College (and now also Princeton University) political history conference.

1 Tom Wolfe, ‘The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening’, in Wolfe, *The Purple Decades* (New York 1983), 265–96.

2 Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York 1982).

3 Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ, 1990).

what historians Debi and Irwin Unger called 'The Great Malaise'.⁴ Reviewing Carroll's book, civil rights historian Nan Woodruff wrote despondently of an 'ongoing tragedy in American society — the political fragmentation of those groups who exist outside the political and economic structure and their inability to produce a cohesive and serious analysis of the social forces that have produced their alienation and exclusion.'⁵

In recent years, though, the 1970s have come into fashion as unexpectedly as a disco craze (and hopefully will provide a more durable legacy).⁶ Or, as historian Ed Berkowitz put it in the title of his recent book, *Something Happened*.⁷ For most historians, that 'something' was a shift to the right which presaged the so-called 'Reagan revolution' of the 1980s and the ascendancy of conservatism in politics and society that followed. In their recently published edited collection of essays, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer conclude, 'At the heart of the 1970s was a massive mobilization by activists, organizations, and political elites associated with the conservative movement.'⁸

Still up for debate is how and why conservatives advanced — be it a result of paranoia or political organizing, fear or faith (or a combination of all of these). Historians and political scientists have also noted the limits to the conservative advance and the continued frustrations of New Right activists. Even so, the emerging consensus is that the 1970s provides the crucial pivot to the modern era, even to Bush II and the War on Terror.⁹ It was *The Decade that Brought You Modern Life*, runs the title of David Frum's 2000 book. (Frum's subtitle: *For Better or Worse*.)¹⁰ Or, to quote Schulman and Zelizer again,

the United States of George W. Bush — with its brash, unilateral approach to the world, devotion to the seemingly incompatible ideals of Christian piety and free market economy, its Sunbelt style and freewheeling interweaving of politics and entertainment — emerged from the Big Bang of the 1970s.¹¹

4 Debi Unger and Irwin Unger, *Postwar America: The United States Since 1945* (New York 1990).

5 Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, Book Review, *Labor History* 25(4) (Fall 1984), 610.

6 See, for example, Edward Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York 2005); David Farber and Beth Bailey (eds), *America in the 1970s* (Lawrence, 2000); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York 2006); Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (New York 2006); Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York 2001); David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70's — the Decade that Brought You Modern Life — For Better or Worse* (New York 2000).

7 Berkowitz, *Something Happened*, op. cit.

8 Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer (eds), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 3.

9 For Bruce Schulman, 'the 1970s marked the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time': Schulman, *The Seventies*, op. cit., xii.

10 Frum, *How We Got Here*, op. cit.

11 Schulman and Zelizer, *Rightward Bound*, op. cit., 2.

Undoubtedly there is much to be said in favour of this argument. Reagan's so-called revolution of the 1980s was as much the culmination of 1970s conservative mobilization as the cause of a new conservative majority. During the 1970s, local conservative groups emerged across the country. Intellectuals fashioned a conservative message for a modern era. International politics, suburbanization and economic turmoil provided fertile territory for conservative campaigners. As for religion and conservative family values, *Time* magazine dubbed 1976 the 'Year of the Evangelical'.¹² One powerful component of the new conservatism was a backlash against the perceived excesses of the 1960s — big government, affirmative action and moral relativism.

In fact, historians have demonstrated the presence and power of conservatism even during the supposedly liberal 1960s. Reagan himself began his political career during the 1964 presidential campaign of California conservative Barry Goldwater. In her influential book *Suburban Warriors* (a case study of Orange County, California), Lisa McGirr demonstrated that grassroots conservatism was anything but an unthinking backlash against 1960s liberal reform. Scholars of Southern conservatism have shown, too, that the rise of the suburban right was at least as much about the politics of middle-class entitlement as it was a reaction to African American advances.¹³ Nevertheless, while recognizing that 'modern conservatism did not emerge out of nowhere', Zelizer and Schulman conclude that 'the Right coalesced into a full-scale political movement and forged durable connections between state and society only in the 1970s'.¹⁴

By contrast, the four essays in this symposium portray the decade of the 1970s as the second act of a long 1960s rather than the first act of an early 1980s. In his study of federal aid to education, Gareth Davies traces the rise of — and increasing support for — Great Society-style big government during the 1970s (and beyond). Stephen Tuck portrays the 1970s as a high-water mark of the black liberation movement — a decade which saw a surge of local mobilization, when previously marginalized groups within the African American community came to the fore politically, and when activists were able to build on the legislative gains of the 1960s. In terms of social protest more generally, Simon Hall shows that a wide range of 1970s activists — from opponents of busing to supporters of gay rights — employed tactics drawn from the models of the previous decade. Finally, Joshua Zeitz highlights the continued vibrancy of radical grassroots politics during the 1970s, in particular second-wave feminism. Whereas group rights had become political during the 1960s, the

12. Stephen Tuck, 'The New American Histories', *Historical Journal* 48(3) (2005), 811–32.

13. John Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties* (New Brunswick 1997); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); Catherine Rymph, *Republican Women* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing* (New York 2001).

14. Schulman and Zelizer, *Rightward Bound*, op. cit., 3.

personal now became political (and politically organized) as never before. Thus the 'Me Decade' was also a decade of intense grassroots politics.

Thus, collectively, the essays suggest that these — mostly overlooked — themes of big government, black activism, social protest and grassroots politics that historians normally associate with the 1960s did not only persist into the 1970s; they prospered during the 1970s. As the essays will show, numerous case studies in particular fields point to a 'long 1960s' — but little of this scholarship has filtered through to the wider discussion of the era. Conservatives as well as liberals embraced big government. African American protest proliferated, and with new power. Social movements of the 1970s — from the right as well as the left — benefited from the legitimization of 1960s militancy. Meanwhile, the weakness of politics at the centre during the 1970s, concludes Zeitz, '[left] ordinary citizens to sort out the world at the local level'.¹⁵

These essays do not seek to overturn the 'rise of conservatism' thesis. After all, the essays look only at certain aspects of American life during the 1970s. And conservatism, for all its internal contradictions and external opposition, would come to dominate 1980s politics and society. But the authors do suggest that these broad examples of the tenacity of 1960s liberal politics, protest and reform must stand alongside studies that see the 1970s as the turn to the right. Indeed, the expansion of some important aspects of the liberal 1960s complicates any presumption of the rise of conservatism during the 1970s. It is a reminder that conservative activists did not simply fill a void of post-1960s disillusionment, but had to face down powerful opposition — in terms of both individuals and ideas. As such, it is likewise a reminder that historians are right to study the rise of conservatism on its own terms. In their commentaries on these essays, Julian Zelizer, Meg Jacobs and Bruce Schulman address the question of how conservatism triumphed in the face of — and perhaps at times because of — the persistence of liberal politics and social protest.

Stephen Tuck

is University Lecturer in American History at Oxford University. He is the author of *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (2003), and is just completing a study of African American freedom struggles from emancipation to the present day.

¹⁵ See Zeitz essay, below.