Part II

People and Movements
American Political Culture Since 1945

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Though the United States has enjoyed an unprecedented run of economic prosperity as it enters the new millennium, its political culture is full of contradictions, some fruitful and others merely frustrating. Conventional wisdom has it that America is the country of the future, yet American politics is in many respects more conservative than it was in 1945. On a crude calculation, the amount of economic and personal freedom is greater than ever before; but while equality has become a fact of political and legal life over the half-century since World War II, social and economic quality are ever more elusive. American culture in general seems to lurch between the postmodern and the premillennial, between globalism and localism. No wonder its political culture presents so many contradictions and has more shapes than Proteus.

It may be that, as Seymour Martin Lipset has argued recently, American political culture represents the wave of the future (Lipset, 2000). With the end of communism, the United States seems to be the model for the postmodern polity, one in which the emphasis falls upon: economic growth; identity and/or single-issue politics; the loss of master narratives or comprehensive ideologies to guide political thinking; and the end of the politics of revolution and emancipation in some deep transformational sense. Indeed, such a politics bears a family resemblance to that suggested by “end of ideology” thinkers of the late 1950s such as Daniel Bell and Lipset (Bell, 1960; Lipset, 1963; Lyotard, 1984; Feher and Heller, 1991). Though Lipset identifies this new politics as a form of American “exceptionalism,” it is rather that America often stands at the cutting edge of historical change and plays a “vanguard,” not an “exceptionalist,” role in its political responses to the contemporary world.

Still, such sweeping generalizations make too many rough places smooth and overlook too many unintended consequences. There is no inexorable link between the “end of ideology” and the “end of history,” except that champions of both positions were probably wrong in their general claims. No comprehensive narrative of political development can explain how all this has come to pass, including why there can be no comprehensive narrative of political development. When viewed through the lens of Fredric Jameson’s Marxist account of “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” or of the liberal exceptionalist position of Bell–Lipset, or of the Kojèveian conservatism of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” position, the whole development seems all too inevitable. Such was not at all the case (Jameson 1991; Fukuyama 1992).

One way to complicate the picture is to break the half-century plus since the end of World War II roughly at 1970, with the decade of the 1960s standing as the hinge
of recent history. It was this long decade, running from the 1960 presidential election of John F. Kennedy by a whisker to the overwhelming reelection of Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1972, that saw American politics disrupted, turned upside down, and threatened with revolution (Jameson, 1988; Dionne, 1991; Isserman and Kazin, 2000). When the dust had settled on the 1960s, the most startling change in American political culture was the ascendancy of what Kevin Phillips called the “emerging Republican majority,” underpinned by a reinvigorated conservative movement and ideology (Phillips, 1969; Nash, 1996). In the same decade, the American left failed to make its challenge to the political status quo stick, or to perpetuate itself in coherent organizational or ideological form (Gitlin, 1987). Despite the increased political visibility of African Americans, women, and ethnic and sexual minorities, the terms of political debate were increasingly shaped by conservatives, while constraints upon political and social change were dictated by an unstable, but at times real, Republican majority. In sum, the 1960s were not the confirmation but the end of the left-of-center political culture regnant since the early 1930s.

Any form of political analysis must confront the problem of how to reconcile historical change with the persistence of political ideologies and structures. This essay is no exception. In what follows, I want to track the fate of three very broad ideological positions—liberalism, conservatism, and radicalism—over the course of the half-century after 1945. To do this I will focus on a cluster of concerns—the role of the state, the nature of politics, and the idea of citizenship as they evolved within each of these positions over time. My focus will fall on American political culture since 1945 and will move back and forth among formal political thought, political institutions and traditions, and political behavior, while relating those phenomena to historical and cultural changes (Almond and Verba, 1963; Rodgers, 1987).

The Vital Center

If Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal continued to shape most of the domestic policies of mainstream liberalism between 1945 and the late 1960s, the ideological ethos of liberalism was less ebullient, its domestic vision more constrained, and its global outlook more contained (Brinkley, 1998). Characterized by the oxymoronic label “The Vital Center” of historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., American liberalism threaded its way warily between a new conservatism enlivened by the Cold War climate of suspicion and an increasingly beleaguered radicalism (Schlesinger, 1949; Nash, 1996; Denning, 1997; Cuordileone, 2000). Moreover, the master concept, and great fear, of the period was totalitarianism, “the great mobilizing core and unifying concept of the Cold War” (Gleason, 1995, p. 3; Arendt, 1958), a phenomenon that stood at the intersection of crass Cold War demagoguery and sophisticated political theory. And thus the politics of “the vital center,” a.k.a. “consensus politics” or “liberal pluralism,” was geared to countering the totalitarian impulse on all fronts, while trying to retain a core of concern with social and political change. First, “real” politics was “about” the pursuit of concrete social and economic interests, as opposed to the “symbolic” politics of identity and status, with its disruptive cultural issues and moral claims (Hofstadter, 1964). Politics was a complex game of bargaining among party and interest-group elites, with the “countervailing power” of government, business, and labor keeping each other in check (Galbraith, 1956; Schumpeter, 1962). In a
political situation where there were no permanent friends or enemies, the premium
was upon pragmatic flexibility rather than ideological consistency, the morality of the
half-loaf rather than the dogmatism of the whole one. Second, the role of the citizen
in the liberal conception of politics was limited primarily to periodic assent to the
actions and agreements of elites (Dahl, 1961; Almond and Verba, 1963). Cold War
liberals frowned upon mass participation in politics as a threat to political stability
and civility. It was all too reminiscent of the totalitarian mobilization of the popula-
tions in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Finally, liberal politics reflected what
Daniel Bell famously referred to as the “end of ideology” in which a rough ideo-
logical consensus, not conflict, was the source and destination of healthy politics
(Bell, 1960).

Underlying this new liberalism were a long-range and a short-range perspective on
American political culture. First, a whole literature, what might be called “the School
of Tocqueville,” took the long view by stressing the way that American political culture
had been, and still was, dominated by what Louis Hartz (1955) called the “liberal tra-
dition” of individual liberties, the contractarian view of society and representative
government. The implication of Hartz’s position was that the post-World War II
consensus informing American politics was always already there at the beginning of
the republic. It was no mere product of Cold War conformity. Though Hartz was
decidedly ambivalent about the hegemonic role of liberalism, others, such as historian
Daniel Boorstin (1953), located – and celebrated – the “genius of American politics”
as precisely the absence of ideological compulsions or utopian visions in American
political culture. Ironically, Boorstin illustrated Hartz’s more subtle point quite strik-
ingly: it was not the absence of ideological politics but the pervasive hegemony of
liberalism that most clearly marked American political culture, past and present.
Where Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal had identified the shared values of the
“American Creed” as an instrument for resolving the nation’s racial “dilemma” in the
mid-1940s, liberalism by the mid-1950s seemed much more a bulwark of the status

Yet the new chastened liberalism was far from at ease with itself. Though seen by
its conservative adversaries as a social and economic leveler, postwar liberalism sig-
nificantly downplayed the importance of equality as an economic or social value. The
Keynesian emphasis upon economic growth rather than redistribution assumed, as
President Kennedy put it, that “the rising tide lifts all the boats” (Galbraith, 1956;
Lekachman, 1966). But, as was later pointed out, in an advanced capitalist economy
there was no way to equalize “positional” goods (Hirsch, 1978); and thus affluence,
ironically, stimulated as much as it quieted status anxieties. For every celebration of
American democracy – and economic affluence – there were anxious voices bemoan-
ing the rampant conformity of postwar American society and culture. Books of
popular social criticism served as secular jeremiads against “the lonely crowd,” “the
organization man,” and “the status seekers.” Why in the midst of affluence did juve-
nile delinquency flourish, and why did popular music fall to what seemed to be the
antinomian impulses of rock and roll? In this postwar cultural mood of diminished
confidence, liberalism had become more timid and less self-assured, a defender of an
attenuated New Deal legacy at home and champion of the containment of commu-
nist expansion abroad. Schlesinger was ironically right on target when he referred to
postwar liberalism as the vital “Center,” not as a mature “Left.”
Yet the 1960s saw developments that both redirected and diffused the thrust of liberalism, in theory and in practice. American liberalism had never exactly been a crusading force for racial equality. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal shied away from the issue for fear of alienating its white southern support, while Adlai Stevenson, the Democrats’ candidate in 1952 and 1956 and darling of sophisticated liberals, was a “moderate” on the issue. Yet liberalism became, willy-nilly, the (white) mainstream champion of black civil rights after World War II. Indeed, the race issue put some of the moral fervor back into an ideologically pragmatic liberalism in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court. Shaped both by Myrdal’s overly optimistic assessment of white America’s commitment to racial fairness and by a new postwar confidence in the capacity of American society to assimilate diverse ethnic groups, the liberal assumption was that, if and when the Jim Crow system of segregation and disfranchisement could be gradually dismantled in the South, African Americans there, and in the rest of the country, could be incorporated into the American consensus without major social or institutional change (Woodward, 1955; Moynihan and Glazer, 1963; Gerstle, 1995).

By the mid-1960s, however, strains within the liberal consensus were beginning to become more apparent. Liberals themselves tended to divide on the political morality and/or wisdom of the civil rights movement’s commitment to direct action. For some liberals, the revival of popular action was to be welcomed. For others, the idea that citizens could be political by marching as well as voting came as something of a shock. In reaction to an expanded notion of citizen participation in politics and to the introduction of clear moral issues into what was supposedly a politics of pragmatic accommodation, some liberals began moving to the center over the course of the 1960s, and then to the right thereafter. For them, the new politics, which bypassed existing political elites and established institutions, threatened the delicate workings of American political institutions. Indeed, many northern liberals missed the significance of Martin Luther King, the most important single political figure of the decade and perhaps of the half-century. But by the mid-1960s, even King adviser and one-time black radical Bayard Rustin was calling for the civil rights movement to leave off “protest” and reenter normal “politics.” Only in that way could the momentum generated by successful challenges to disfranchisement and segregation be channeled into support for President Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” and its attempt to revitalize the New Deal politics of economic and social improvement through a “war on poverty” (Rustin, 1971 [1965]; Carson, 1981; Garrow, 1986).

Overall, a crucial political and historical effect of the civil rights revolution was to marry the cause of African Americans with that of the Democratic Party, the party of liberalism. In terms of political alignments, the Republican Party lost – or handed over – the black vote to the Democrats from the 1960s on. The process of attrition that had begun in the 1930s became a rout by the end of that decade. But the Republican loss of the African American vote was more than balanced by the “southern strategy” adopted by presidential candidate and then President Nixon. According to the latter, Republicans increasingly picked up the support of the white South, both middle class and blue collar, and of those white Americans generally who were motivated by racial prejudice and/or fear of what was perceived as an alarming growth of “crime in the streets” and the decline of “law and order.” Inside and outside the South, the hemorrhaging of crucial blue-collar and white ethnic support
away from liberalism was proceeding apace. Most importantly, it meant that conservat
ism exited the 1960s with a new popular (and populist) base. Race was by no
means the only cause of the reconfiguration of American party politics and the reshap
ing of its political culture. But it stood somewhere very near the center of those polit-

A second major development growing out of the civil rights movement and mas-
sive public demonstrations against the Vietnam War was the growing centrality of “ri
ts talk” to the rhetorical and political agenda of one wing of liberalism. As legal theo-
rist Ronald Dworkin announced in the title of his 1977 book, it was time that Ameri-
cans began “taking rights seriously.” Yet, as recently as the 1930s, liberalism had been
very wary of the politics and jurisprudence of rights. Historically, American conser-
vatives had been much more prone to appeal to rights, primarily in defense of private property and freedom from state regulation, while progressive
forces, informed by the hard-headed jurisprudence of legal realism and with confi-
dence in popular support, looked to the decisions of popularly elected bod-
cles, for example the Congress, not to the court system to right social wrongs. But the civil
rights revolution had revealed that the Congress would rarely initiate significant
measures against racial discrimination; and thus the appeal to rights, not inter-
ests, in the court system became the first resort for racial change rather than the last
resort against it.

The effects of the rights revolution – not only on blacks but on women, gays, and
the disabled – were hugely significant, though not entirely positive. The “judicial-
ization” of liberalism meant that the more court rulings to enforce the rights of
African Americans or women or any minority group were handed down, the more
liberalism lost the support of crucial sectors of the white population. Whether it was
Alabama’s George Wallace’s railing against bureaucrats and “pointy-headed intellec-
tuals” in the 1960s and early 1970s, or Richard Nixon’s appeals to “middle America,”
or successive presidential candidates of both parties running “against” Washington,
a sure-fire vote winner in the wake of the 1960s seemed to be an attack on the courts
Liberalism was identified with issues – busing, affirmative action, the failed
Equal Rights Amendment, abortion rights – that inevitably offended this or that sector of
its former (white and European ethnic) constituency and seemed to indicate that it
was captive to the minorities and “special interests.” By the 1980s, liberalism, helped
along by conservative special pleading, was increasingly seen to be out of touch with
“the people” and dominated by a “new class” of elite intellectuals, academics, and
policymakers located in Washington (Kristol, 1983).

As the 1990s hove into view, blue-collar and working-class Americans, largely
white and largely male – those who had illogically come to be called the “middle
class” – were fed up with feeling overtaxed and underappreciated (Edsall and Edsall,
1991). The sense of focused anger that George Wallace had mobilized in the 1960s
had now become a free-floating irritability permeating mainstream politics. For some
socially oriented liberals, American social democrats as it were, a renewed emphasis
upon social and economic issues over racial, ethnic, and cultural differences seemed
to be the best way to recreate the New Deal coalition and to halt liberalism’s pre-
cipitous decline. If, as sociologist William Julius Wilson maintained, class had replaced
race as the prime obstacle to black progress, then perhaps a new coalition could be
formed across racial and ethnic lines (Wilson, 1978; Gitlin, 1995; Sleeper, 1997). “Justice as fairness,” to evoke political philosopher John Rawls’s resonant phrase, still had a certain hold on the liberal imagination. The more viable, centrist alternative was for liberalism to adopt much of the conservative rhetoric celebrating market forces, encouraging economic innovation and trimming bloated government, while trying to keep this leaner federal government responsive to its core constituency. Above all, claimed journalist E. J. Dionne in the early 1990s, liberalism had to break the conservative stranglehold on the political-ideological agenda by shifting the political debate away from the 1960s arguments about race, culture, and communism (Dionne, 1991).

Still, for all the efforts to find a “Middle” or “Third Way,” post-1960s liberalism was riven by a tension between a social liberalism, which itself was divided between its commitment to ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities and to a still potent industrial working-class population, and a rights-oriented liberalism that stressed the judicial and bureaucratic route to a more just society. There was no logical or conceptual incompatibility between social and rights liberalism. But, in actual fact, these two orientations stretched liberalism nearly to the breaking point. What kept this tension manageable was the general run of economic success of the two Clinton administrations in the 1990s. In power, liberals became centrists after the Clintons’ failure to pass a comprehensive medical care bill. That, along with the president’s support for conservative-initiated welfare reform, meant that liberalism in power had come to depend upon the continued growth of the economy to bail it out of trouble. And even that failed to guarantee a Democrat victory, as shown by the 2000 election.

**Up From Traditionalism**

If liberalism was placed on the defensive by the Cold War and McCarthyism, those phenomena were the making of post-World War II conservatism. And if liberalism spent the rest of the century trying to live down the failures – and sometimes the successes – of the 1960s, this was because post-1960s conservatism placed a dogged hostility to the 1960s at the core of its ideological vision. It is a startling fact that American conservatism flourished over the last three decades of the century, despite having backed the “wrong” side in the four major political crises of the three decades after World War II – McCarthyism, civil rights, Vietnam, and Watergate.

Not surprisingly, political and intellectual historians disagree as to the essence of American conservatism. Where some see a considerable overlap with the liberal tradition, others, particularly conservatives, suggest that it is best seen as a coalition of anti-communists, traditionalists, libertarians, and, after the 1960s, neoconservatives and a religious right based on certain shared values and on a common enemy, liberalism (Allitt, 1995; Nash, 1996; Brinkley, 1998). The contrasts with liberalism on the communism issue are instructive. Where anti-communist liberals considered the conflict with the Soviet Union to be a political one, conservatives saw it as a Manichean conflict, a metahistorical face-off between “the Free World” and what President Reagan later referred to as the totalitarian “evil empire” of the Soviet Union and its satellites. The contrast between the liberal rhetoric of “containment” and the conservative goal of “rolling back” communism spoke volumes about the differences in vision.
Still, postwar conservatives could differ widely from one another. Traditionalist conservatives, whether of Catholic, southern, or European provenance, saw modernity as a period of inexorable decline, a long twilight struggle, not just against communism and liberalism but against what these secular ideologies represented—rationalism and secularism, materialism and egalitarianism. At the other end of the conservative spectrum, libertarian conservatives stressed freedom over order and competition over traditional institutions. Where traditionalists bemoaned the materialism and license of modernity, libertarians deified the workings of the market and often sounded as though their *raison d'être* was to make the world safe for profit-making. Still, these disparate strands of conservatism were brought together by William F. Buckley, Jr., whose magazine, *National Review*, founded in the mid-1950s, became the respectable mouthpiece for the broad church of American conservatism. On the vital issues of the 1950s and 1960s—race and civil rights, decolonization, President Johnson’s Great Society, opposition to the Vietnam War, the counterculture and the New Left—conservatism spoke a “No—in Thunder” (Buckley, 1959; Judis, 1988).

But what united practically all conservatives was (and remains) a firm opposition to the state. In this, conservatives drew liberally upon a persistent “anti-governmentalist” strain in American political culture. Thus, there was practically no tradition of strong-state, “one-nation” conservatism in America, in contrast with, say, Britain. Many conservatives, particularly those south of the Mason-Dixon line, deployed traditional states’ rights doctrine to argue against federal civil rights measures in the 1960s. Libertarians considered the *dirigiste* state as a force that stifled rather than encouraged the most productive functioning of the economy and as responsible for restrictions on individual freedoms (Friedman, 1962). Though traditionalist conservatives might doubt the beneficent effect of market forces on settled practices and received institutions, they could unite with libertarians in opposing (federal) government intervention where race or economics were concerned. For conservative refugee intellectuals, anti-statist grew quite naturally out of their experience with totalitarianisms of the left and right in Europe (Hayek, 1944). Thus where New Deal and Great Society liberals saw the state as a valuable instrument of social policy, conservatives sought to bolster the strength of the core institutions of civil society and of the household. All roads led to serfdom in conservative attitudes toward the state.

Another area where conservatives differed significantly from liberalism and radicalism was in the rank ordering of equality, freedom, and order. Not surprisingly, order rather than liberty and certainly not equality was the first principle of conservatism. Conservative narratives of the origins of the American republic stressed the priority of the Constitution over the Declaration of Independence and often interpreted Jefferson’s document as a defense of the rights of British subjects, not as a charter of inalienable (human) rights and the right to revolution (Kendall, 1988). Thus, the rights discourse of post-1960s liberalism fell on deaf conservative ears. In a broad sense, conservatives were for restrictions on individual freedom where it threatened the general authority of the state or seemed to undermine the institutions of marriage and the family, heterosexuality, and traditional roles for women. In no way were conservatives First Amendment champions or devotees of civil disobedience. While liberalism sought to strengthen individual liberty in matters of conscience and taste, conservatives sought to create a moral consensus about personal morality.
and artistic choice that would provide a firm foundation for a properly ordered society. In this sense, conservatives privileged order above freedom and equality.

Yet, in the economic sphere, most conservatives sought to maximize market freedoms, while restricting regulatory and redistributionist measures to achieve a greater economic and social equality as traditionally advocated by New Deal and Great Society liberalism (Brinkley, 1998). Indeed, the basic conservative assumption was that, aside from basic moral equality and equal civil and political rights, equality was neither possible nor desirable. If the market were allowed to operate in unfettered fashion, as Friedmanite theory and Reaganite practice asserted, then individuals, whatever their creed or color or gender, would assume the social and economic position appropriate to their talent and virtue. More so than with liberals, citizenship was for conservatives a call to patriotism, an obligation to support traditional morality and institutions, and the imperative to become politically involved when conservative positions were threatened. But neither conservatives nor liberals had a strong participatory notion of citizenship as a good in its own right.

The post-1960s social and cultural development that most benefited conservatives was a religious revival among evangelical, pentecostal, charismatic, and fundamentalist Protestants, while the traditional denominations stagnated. As a social phenomenon, it confounded sociologists of religion in several ways. First, it exploded the static, trinitarian division of Americans into simple categories of “Protestant–Catholic–Jew” suggested by Will Herberg in the 1950s. Second, it also fragmented the liberal political consensus, which was already coming unglued in the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, by challenging what Robert Bellah had called the American “civil religion,” a rather bland, vaguely liberal, political religion which assumed that all Americans agreed on the spiritual underpinnings of their political institutions. Third, and most surprisingly, the revival discredited the assumption that the modernization of America would see the waning of religious belief and observance (Herberg, 1955; Bellah, 1970; Cuddihy, 1978; Putnam, 2000).

In retrospect, it was too easy to identify these new Christian groups with a hostility to modernity, due to their post-1960s emphasis upon traditional family values and their tendency to “moralize” all political issues (Lienisch, 1993), for they readily embraced the latest (post)modern technologies to spread their message. Most importantly, this new Great Awakening became, contrary to most precedents, political with a vengeance. From the early 1970s to the early 1980s, a new religious/Christian right emerged, drawing many of its members from traditional Democratic constituencies in the rural and small-town South and Southwest and moving them into the Republican column, particularly in presidential elections. Thus the popular base of American conservatism was radically expanded not only by “dissenters” from the civil rights revolution, but also by those who rejected the new hedonistic and “secular humanist” lifestyle identified with the 1960s counterculture and its heirs (Hunter, 1983; Lienisch, 1993).

Finally, the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s was aided by the addition of a new grouping to the ranks of conservative intellectuals – the so-called neoconservatives (Steinfield, 1980; Nash, 1996). The core neoconservative intellectuals were one-time liberals and Old Left radicals from the talented group of New York intellectuals who had set the agenda for high culture from 1945 to the mid-1960s. During the Cold War, several of them began a long odyssey across the political spectrum. In the wake
of the 1960s, they rejected the cultural antinomianism and the “triumph of the therapeutic” marking that decade. Underpinning the conservative cultural critique was the assumption that the health of the nation’s political values and institutions was bound up closely with its personal, expressive, and intellectual culture. A culture of hedonism and liberal “openness” mistook vacuity for tolerance, while moral relativism undermined the cultural traditions that provided foundations for political as well as cultural institutions (Rieff, 1966; Bell, 1976).

But the neoconservatives were also reacting against what they saw as the failure of liberal social policies and programs. Conventional liberal measures, they argued, increased rather than decreased personal dependency on the state, particularly among African Americans. Neoconservatives, and also some older liberals, opposed the emerging federally mandated policy of affirmative action and the shift from what they saw as the principle of “equality of opportunity” to one of “equality of result” (Bell, 1972). Though such figures as Daniel Bell and Daniel Patrick Moynihan tacked back toward liberalism by 1980, there is no doubt that American conservatism gained considerably in intellectual credibility from the defection of these one-time liberals to its side.

Ronald Reagan’s great political achievement was to unite, for a time, the various strands of the postwar conservative tradition in one great conservative moment (Wills, 1987; Himmelstein, 1990; Kazin, 1992). Perhaps the first “postmodern” president insofar as he was a creation of the entertainment industry and a quintessential product of image politics, Reagan built his ideology on anti-communism abroad and anti-statism at home, except in the area of national defense, where there was a vast expansion in the 1980s driven by a kind of military Keynesianism. Otherwise, the economy was ostensibly run on “supply-side,” free-market principles, a triumph for the libertarian wing of conservatism, while the traditional morality of the Christian right set the terms for behavior in the private sphere. But as Reagan’s successors discovered, it was no easy task to keep the conservative coalition together. As with liberalism, turn-of-the-millennium conservatism was as much a set of tendencies in search of a unifying ideology as it was a coherent vision of the world, particularly in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire.

**Democracy Was in the Streets**

If liberalism was placed on the defensive, political radicalism was fatally damaged by the Cold War and the anti-communist atmosphere after World War II. On the face of it, the left was in a very strong position at the conclusion of the war. Union membership was at its peak; the New Deal still had considerable strength; and the Cold War had not yet become a fact of life. By 1948, however, radicalism was in tatters. The loose but powerful “cultural front” identified by Michael Denning as made up of left-leaning New Dealers, the CIO unions, and the Communist Party, along with “progressive” writers and intellectuals, never recovered from the internecine strife within the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) over the issue of communism; the onset of the second Red Scare in 1947; and the rout of the Progressive Party in 1948. As millions of white and black southerners streamed north after 1945, the composition of the northern working class itself changed drastically and its progressive political orientation was significantly diluted. Neither white nor black
southerners had much in common with the left-wing culture of the prewar northern working class (Denning, 1997).

Yet the decimation of the Old Left cleared the way for what came to be called the New Left, energized by the emerging civil rights movement in the South after 1954 and in some cases taking its cue from the British New Left. If the nascent New Left agreed on anything, it was the need to find a new agency or carrier of radical change to replace the classical proletariat. As C. Wright Mills asserted in 1959, the left should jettison its “labor metaphysic” (Mills, 1963 [1960]). As the 1960s unfolded, this search for a new proletariat was to identify and then drop as possible candidates young people, intellectuals, African Americans, even a new middle class, and finally, the traditional proletariat again.

Indeed, this issue was symptomatic of the wide organizational, ideological, and experiential gap between the Old Left and the New Left. Yet the gap should not be taken as an abyss, since the intellectual and political progenitors of the New Left were veterans of the Trotskyist movement, the Communist Party, Garveyite Black Nationalism, the Progressive intellectual tradition, anarchist and peace movements, and European émigré radicalism identified with the Frankfurt School of Social Research (King, 1972; Jay, 1973; Breines, 1982; Isserman, 1987; Miller, 1987). Small political journals such as Dwight Macdonald’s Politics, Irving Howe’s Dissent, Liberation, Studies on the Left, and Freedomways constituted a bridge between the 1930s and the 1960s (Isserman, 1987).

As it shaped up in the early 1960s, the New Left ideology divided between a critique of American political, social, and economic reality and a positive vision of a new form of politics. While some still used Marxist terms such as “monopoly capitalism,” it was more common to indict “advanced industrial society” or “the Power Elite,” the “Organized System” or “the Technocracy” (Mills, 1956; Goodman, 1960; Marcuse, 1964; Roszak, 1969). Significantly, it was not so much economic exploitation as it was the system’s political and cultural domination that attracted most New Left attention. This of course was another salient difference from the Old Left. New Left intellectuals also attacked the liberal elite, especially so-called “NATO” intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Daniel Bell, who, it was claimed, existed to justify American anti-communism and defense of the status quo (Mills, 1963 [1960]; Marcuse, 1964; Chomsky, 1969). With the escalation of the Vietnam War by the Johnson administration, this critique of the American system came to seem increasingly persuasive.

Yet the New Left was not without a positive vision of politics, as expressed in two slogans – “participatory democracy” and “the personal is the political” (SDS, 1966; Miller, 1987). Participatory democracy had a complex genealogy, but in the immediate context of the 1960s it originated in the radical student wing of the civil rights movement as it organized rural and small-town black communities (not industrial workers) throughout the South (Payne, 1995). Leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) such as Tom Hayden had experience in the early civil rights movement; and SDS became committed to participatory democracy within its own organization, while encouraging it in the northern working-class communities and among the university students it sought to organize (Sale, 1973; Breines, 1982). Participatory democracy entailed a rejection of conventional party politics and representative institutions and an embrace of consensus rather than majority rule in its
own organizations. Most importantly, neither leadership nor issues were to be imposed on a community by radical organizers; rather, people had the right to make the decisions that affected their lives.

In particular, three aspects of the ideology of participatory politics challenged mainstream liberalism. Energized by the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, the New Left insisted that moral and ideological issues were an essential part of politics and not to be eschewed as somehow nonpolitical. Second, the New Left was often as hostile to the activist state as conservatives were, particularly the militantly libertarian Young Americans for Freedom in the 1960s (Berman, 1996). That said, the New Left was certainly no champion of free-market economics. A cooperative commonwealth or communitarian socialism was its model in the first half of the decade, while there was even a relapse into Marxism by the end of the decade.

Third, the New Left’s emphasis upon participatory politics placed the issue of citizenship at the heart of its political vocabulary. Southern blacks spoke movingly of the empowering effects of voting and participation in politics as a citizen (King, 1992; Payne, 1995). At about this same time, young New Left historians aimed to write early American history “from the bottom up,” to focus on the people and not political elites when writing political history (Lemisch, 1968). In addition, what was known as the “republican synthesis” emerged by the mid-1970s to challenge the Hartz thesis concerning the hegemonic role of liberalism in American political culture (Bailyn, 1967; Wood, 1969; Pocock, 1975). Hannah Arendt’s On Revolution (1963) apotheosized certain forgotten aspects of the era of the American Revolution—namely, Jefferson’s ward system and its attempt to institutionalize citizen participation in politics. For Arendt this was an alternative revolutionary tradition to the Old Left’s Jacobin–Bolshevik one. Thus Arendt, the German Jewish refugee, gave to participatory politics a very powerful and important native pedigree (Arendt, 1963).

In retrospect, the republican historiography and Arendt’s political theory of participatory freedom clearly prefigured the emergence of communitarianism in the 1980s as an alternative to rights-based, procedural liberalism. In Habits of the Heart (1985), the sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues reached for biblical and republican traditions as communitarian antidotes to the individualistic tendencies of mainstream American politics and culture. At the heart of the communitarian vision stood the active citizen, schooled in the political virtues of democratic discussion and action. Indeed, the term “community” had shifted meaning between the 1960s and the 1980s. Where 1960s radicalism conceived of community in terms of “intentionalist” utopian projects, by the 1980s it referred more to actually existing ethnic/racial, religious, or even gender communities. Community was not something to be consciously created de novo by casting off older commitments. Rather, it was to be rediscovered and nurtured in already existing sites and groups, though a considerable degree of choice of one’s political and cultural identity was assumed (Lenz and Ling, 2000).

The other big political idea generated by the New Left was “the personal is the political.” It was particularly important for the more radical, activist sector of a burgeoning second-wave feminism, referring as it did both to a personal style of political practice and to the need to develop a political analysis of the family and of intimate relations (Evans, 1979). That is, the personal or private sphere – the site of intimate relations between men and women, husbands and wives, and parents and children –
was political to the extent that its functioning was linked to the larger structures of power (Elshtain, 1981; Pateman, 1989). “Patriarchy,” to use the term radical feminist Kate Millet put into circulation, was the glue that held together the macro- and micro-levels of political, social, economic, and cultural life (Millet, 1970). Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) was a moderate-sounding book with radical implications for the development of “difference” feminism, since it rooted two distinct modes of ethical thinking in the quite different early childhood experiences of boys and girls. Indeed, the two styles – an ethic of care and responsibility versus an ethic of rights and autonomy – captured something essential about the difference between communitarianism and liberalism.

Still, for all the genuine theoretical advances made, what was striking about feminist politics in the post-1960s period was that the focus fell not on transforming economic and political institutions, but in addressing the way personal issues – access to birth control and abortion, for example – had to become part of a public political debate. The great political setback of the 1970s and early 1980s for the women’s movement was the defeat of an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Indeed, according to some analysts of the issue, the failure of the ERA was linked to the failure of the women’s movement to do the kind of grassroots organizing that the civil rights movement had done (Berry, 1986; Mansbridge, 1986).

A final political legacy of the 1960s derived from the intertwined successes and failures of the civil rights movement. With the passage of the two great pieces of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, the face of southern society and polity was on its way to being transformed. (That the movement itself encompassed elements of all three positions on the political spectrum may provide one clue to its eventual triumph.) But the disillusionment with white society that followed in the wake of the movement helped generate another important new idea – that African Americans were a distinct community of history, tradition, and culture. The theme of black difference, along with the impossibility and undesirability of assimilation into American society, was the great message of Malcolm X, who, until just before his death in February 1965, worked to reawaken the nationalist tradition among black Americans (Malcolm X, 1965; Cruse, 1967). Taken up in various ways by black political and cultural nationalists, along with groups such as the Black Panthers, the idea of organizing around cultural differences spread to other groups. Indeed, in almost every post-1960s social movement, including the women’s movement, an emerging gay and lesbian subculture, and among America’s rapidly growing Hispanic population, an initial stage in which the goal was integration and assimilation rapidly gave way to the cultivation of group cultural and political consciousness in opposition to mainstream culture and politics. Thus the origins of, and template for, “identity politics,” the “new social movements,” and eventually “multiculturalism” in the 1980s lay in the trajectory of 1960s racial politics as the civil rights movement gave way to Black Power and black consciousness, including an early version of Afrocentrism (Van Deburg, 1992). Indeed, an important semantic shift in the meaning of “pluralism” took place between the 1950s and the 1980s. While pluralism in liberal political discourse referred primarily to the economic and social differences the political system existed to mediate, by the 1980s, pluralism referred more often to the variety of cultural, that is, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and gender traditions among America’s increasingly diverse population.
Two important issues in cultural politics were raised by multiculturalism as it surfaced in the 1980s. First, what was it exactly that the “politics of recognition” wanted (Taylor, 1992; Hollinger, 1995)? It was perfectly rational to debate affirmative action, bilingual education, Afrocentric educational curricula, gender or ethnic racially based schools if the needs and interests of new, post-1960s immigrant groups from Latin America as well as from Asia were to be accommodated. Yet the politics of recognition seemed also at times to entail explicit legal recognition and protection for cultural differences. Again, a semantic shift had occurred since the 1960s. Where rights in the liberal tradition referred to powers and protections adhering to individuals, the politics of multiculturalism tended to conceive of rights in group terms and as belonging to individuals by virtue of their membership in that group. Where the assumption of moral universalism was once considered a major achievement of early post-World War II political and legal developments, universalism and liberal humanism were by the 1980s regularly denounced as an ideological smokescreen for white, middle-class, Western male domination.

Opposition to multiculturalism was not hard to predict. Conservatives suddenly emerged as firm defenders of a colorblind Constitution and, along with traditional liberals, vigorously defended “equality of opportunity not results” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997). Indeed, a growing cadre of black conservatives joined their white counterparts in opposing affirmative action and racial preferences (Sowell, 1984; Loury, 1995). Not surprisingly, liberals were often bitterly divided over the politics of difference, affirmative action, and the political implications of multiculturalism. One effect of the debate was to push some liberals to a kind of cultural nationalist position. According to this position, there was a common American culture of shared values and commitments to basic institutions, and without that common culture the political health of the nation would be hard to maintain. More positively, a coherent political culture was worth preserving and strengthening, not straining to the breaking point. Thus, on the view of liberal nationalists such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Michael Lind, the destination of multiculturalism was likely to be a cultural – and political – balkanization, even apartheid (Schlesinger, 1992; Lind, 1995; Sleeper, 1997).

And yet, for all the heat – and light – generated by 1960s radicalism and its spin-offs over the ensuing decades, changes in the political culture and basic political institutions of the country were surprisingly circumscribed. The political-legal recognition of African Americans and women was a major, and long overdue, accomplishment. But no radical political party survived the 1960s; nor was there an independent movement of the left that regularly influenced national elections. More surprisingly, ecological-environmental forces, potentially the most significant political contribution of the countercultural wing of 1960s radicalism, never developed the political coherence or power of European Green parties. By the new millennium, political activity in this area lagged far behind, though demonstrations against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Seattle, Washington, and Washington, DC, in 2000 promised a more active future. And with communism and socialism discredited, what had always been a weakness in post-World War II radicalism – the inability to conceive of alternative forms of economic organization – was even more glaring than it had been in the 1960s. By privileging the political and cultural as the crucial areas for radical analysis and action, radicalism lost what base it had in the
white working class and never regained it. The result was, and is, an impoverishment of American political culture.

Coda: Salem Without the Witches?

Taking the collective temperature of the United States is a longstanding tradition in the nation’s intellectual history. The latest effort to examine the basic political and social institutions of the nation, including its political culture, is Robert Putnam’s massively documented and often fascinating study, *Bowling Alone* (2000). Though he describes himself as a member of the “declensionist” tradition of American studies (Putnam, 2000, p. 25), his work is nevertheless the gentlest of jeremiads. “State of the nation” studies, since Tocqueville, have tended to divide into two broad camps. One post-World War II tradition, which includes works such as Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978) and Bellah et al.’s *Habits of the Heart* (1985), focuses on the dangers of excessive individualism, while the other tradition, exemplified in the work of Erik Erikson and David Riesman, warns of the tyranny of the majority. Putnam, whose central thesis is that since the 1960s almost every sphere of American social and political life has seen a decline in participation and in “social capital,” clearly belongs in the anti-individualism, pro-community tradition. Declensionist though he may be, Putnam is also an optimist. The subtitle of his book is: “The Collapse and Revival of American Community”; the ideal of the revival being something like “Salem Without the Witches” (Putnam, 2000, p. 354).

Though Putnam’s work reveals much about what ails the nation’s political culture, particularly the low voter turnout in local, state, and national elections, his main concern is with the rise of civic disengagement since the 1950s. (This in itself is a far cry from the liberal pluralists who feared too much political participation in the early years after World War II.) Putnam’s research led him to identify several factors that explain this decline. They include new patterns of work, which incorporate women into the workforce; the suburbanization of the society; and the baleful influence of television. But the chief cause of the decline, he contends, is generational. Something in the experience of those born after World War II, a population cohort encompassing the “baby boomers” and the “Generation Xers,” led them to withdraw from social, religious, cultural, economic, and political organizations. To unpack the title: it is not that people no longer go bowling, suggests Putnam. It is that they no longer bowl as a team. Hence: “bowling alone.”

Before concluding, a few comments by way of critique of Putnam are in order. Though Putnam is extremely thorough in exploring the implication of his data, there are certain conceptual weaknesses in *Bowling Alone*. Putnam clearly distinguishes between political and civic/social participation, but his chief emphasis falls upon the latter. Perhaps for that reason, he fails to conceptualize the relationship and/or differences between the two spheres. For instance, he accepts the Tocquevillean assumption that there is a positive correlation between civic and political participation. Yet one has to wonder why, if American civic participation is still as high or higher than that of most European countries, its political participation, as measured by voting, is significantly lower. Second, there are several respects in which Putnam’s taxonomy of civic participation remains unsatisfactory. Theda Skocpol has, for instance, suggested an important distinction between organizations where people “do for” others
and those where people “do with” their fellow participants (Skocpol, 1999, p. 8). A distinction between institutions that seek to maintain the status quo and those that seek to reform or transform it might also have been of use in refining his analysis.

But most importantly, Putnam seriously slights the importance of the power differentials among social and political institutions. There may be cultural trouble “out there” on Main Street; but, if John Judis and others are correct, the more serious problem lies in the concentration of economic and political power along the K Street corridor of Washington, DC. Put another way, it is not just the habits of the heart but the depths of corporate pockets and the decimation of American unions that have contributed to the decline of political participation (Vallely, 1996, p. 1; Judis, 2000; Robin, 2001, p. 3). Interestingly, such a critique of Putnam echoes C. Wright Mills’s critique of American political culture in *The Power Elite* in 1956. Mills too noted the loss of what he called “publics” and thus a certain massification of political and social life. But his more important point, one which Putnam neglects, was that the crucial, life-and-death decisions affecting the nation were not made in the middle-range political institutions, including the US Congress, which citizen mobilization might influence. Thus, it is not clear what difference increased citizen participation would make in the operation or impact of large national and global economic-financial institutions. Whatever the case, it is an area of concern that Putnam largely avoids.

Finally, Putnam’s book helps make the point that the 1960s were truly the hinge of postwar American political life. It also confirms that that decade was not the beginning of a “new politics” but the last gasp of the “old politics” created by what Putnam calls “the long civic generation” born between 1910 and the early 1940s. This historical irony is underscored by the fact that the most vital political movements surviving – and flourishing – after the 1960s have tended to be conservative rather than radical. As Putnam suggests, it is “among evangelical Christians, rather than among the ideological heirs of the sixties, that we find the strongest evidence of an upwelling of civic engagement against the ebb tide” (Putnam, 2000, p. 162). On the plus side, the most important single achievement of that decade – the dismantling of institutional racism and sexism – has been reinforced since then by rising tolerance of diversity. Putnam is nothing if not honest in admitting that an increase in social capital itself is not always an unalloyed good. The emergence in the 1950s and 1960s of White Citizens’ Councils in the South testified to emerging white grassroots political activity, while the organization of violence-prone movements of the radical right in the 1990s also increased the fund of social capital in American society. But generally, Putnam claims, an increase in civic participation can be correlated with an increase in social tolerance.

Overall, Putnam seems to offer a deterministic decline narrative, one in which nothing any individual or group could have done would have reversed the trend toward privatism. But the micro-explanations for political withdrawal can range very widely and the reader of *Bowling Alone* might have hoped for more along these lines. If politics is seen as essentially concerned with the satisfaction of economic interests, as it is in the standard liberal and conservative models of politics, it is hardly surprising that politics can seem superfluous in times of general prosperity. Those who do vote vote for the party/ideology which promises to minimize state interference and maximize personal and economic liberty, though which of these two factors – economic wellbeing or state interference – trumps the other is not clear. Nor, in such
a situation, is it surprising that symbolic politics—issues dealing with self-respect and recognition, the spiritual fate of the nation, cultural decline—and “log-jam” issues such as abortion, gun control, and affirmative action seem to dominate political discourse. Such issues are not ones that generally originate in regular party organizations; nor do they tend to be resolvable through “rational” compromise, since they derive from overarching worldviews, not concrete economic interests. If the election of 2000 shows anything, it is that it is stupid to think it is ever “just the economy, stupid.”

Finally, Putnam’s study, instructive and genuinely interesting as it is, fails to illuminate what it meant to be political in the 1960s or in the year 2000, from any position along the political spectrum. How much of the withdrawal from civic and political engagement has been linked to the deep disappointment with and alienation from “the System” experienced by the politically active in the 1960s? Or was it that the New Left was less an aberration from than an accentuation of certain American traits that diminished civic and political participation? The New Left’s anti-institutional and anti-ideological bias seems, in retrospect, to be fundamentally at odds with its “project” of democratizing American life. Where the New Right, suggests Putnam, used church organizations or soon created new ones, a major bulwark of the left, the union movement, was crippled by the postwar Red Scare, and the changing nature of the economy militated against the continued growth of the traditional working class. The left never found anything or anyone to replace it. On the other hand, post-1960s racial, ethnic, and gender groupings have been too divided to create stable political coalitions or to develop a politics of the public interest. One lesson of the 1960s and since may be that the particularism of identity politics makes it very difficult to build coalitions, much less to develop a coherent ideology; and emphasizing “the personal” can undermine, as much as it contributes to, a vital politics.

As for the future, the long-term political effects of information technology and the Internet remain to be seen. The range of, and the speed with which, political ideas and images can be transmitted have increased tremendously. But whether this will fundamentally change the nature of politics, facilitating the emergence of an “electronic republic” or merely encouraging the “soundbite” politics already so prevalent, is anyone’s guess. Yet, a global, public realm created by television and the Web emerges periodically, as in 1989 and coverage of the events in China, in Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union. But for every example of the revival of the politics of participation, there are just as many cautionary tales of massive invasions of the private sphere and attenuation of individual or group freedoms through surveillance to make anyone wary of predicting new forms and possibilities for democratic politics in America or around the globe.

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