

AMERICAN RADICALS: MARGIN AND MAINSTREAM

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Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Gabriel Thompson, *America's Social Arsonist: Fred Ross and Grassroots Organizing in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016)

Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015)

Is it time to revisit the history of the American left? Historians have largely directed their attention elsewhere, toward a study of political culture, to the intersectionality of race and gender, or to the structures and ethos of capitalism in order to explain, or perhaps simply ignore, the absence of an organized radicalism during the last several decades. But with Bernie Sanders, a self-described “democratic socialist,” making a good show in his campaign for the 2016 Democratic nomination, and with upwards of 43 percent of all Democrats actually describing themselves as socialists in some states, the time may have come for another effort to answer Werner Sombart’s query, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?”

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Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps make a bold and synthetic attempt in *Radicals in America*, a short but comprehensive history of the American left during the last seven decades. They divide the book into three parts. The first explains the fate of the “Old Left,” mainly but not exclusively that found in the Communist orbit, from its moment of considerable social and political influence during World War II through the era of McCarthyite repression and fragmentation in the 1950s. Although many historians have plowed this ground, Brick and Phelps bring to the politics and personalities of this era a perspective animated by their own “third-camp” anti-Stalinism, a doctrine equally hostile to Western capitalism

and East Bloc Communism. Hence they offer a certain commendable affirmative action for those linked to pacifist or Trotskyist traditions.

In the middle chapters the authors offer a spirited account of what constituted leftism in the era of the 1960s civil rights movement and the New Left of the anti-Vietnam era. They rightly extend this political moment well into the 1970s, when many activists thought a second 1960s act still on offer, if only they linked an unvarnished radicalism with disciplined organization. That moment ended badly, but the authors don't just fold their literary tent. Instead, they devote more than a hundred remaining pages in their book to a discussion of American radicalism in the years after 1980, when the onset of austerity, the tilt of American politics to the right, and the trench warfare that characterized the culture wars transformed the terrain upon which the left sought to make its influence felt. Few have tried to make a coherent narrative out of the social movements and cultural currents that animated American radicalism in this era, but Brick and Phelps plunge onward, seeking to construct a historicized account of the variegated organizations, ideologies, and social formations that have flourished and floundered in the last forty years. As we shall see, the effort to create a structured history of American radicalism during these conservative decades generates an analytical mixed bag, full of useful insights and historicizations, but in the end raising far more questions than the authors are capable of answering in this short book. Nevertheless, the attempt is a bold and courageous one, which puts a messy and discordant set of ideas and personalities on the historiographical agenda, in search of a synthetic narrator who can make sense of it all.

Brick and Phelps do, however, frame their book in terms of an overriding dialectic, that between "margin and mainstream" as the key to understanding how radicals persevere and sometimes even win, and not just during the years since the end of World War II. As they point out in their introduction, the abolitionist agitator Wendell Phillips embodied the kind of American radical who moved from ideological and social marginality to the political mainstream as abolitionist ideas became more influential, more an accepted part of partisan politics, and then literally militarized with the onset of the Civil War. When union troops sang "John Brown's body lies a moldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on," they demonstrated how once marginal sentiments, for which Phillips had been vilified, can turn into world-historic forces. And yet the radical impress upon American society has all too often been devalued, because, as Brick and Phelps write in their conclusion, "Radicalism becomes invisible, paradoxically, in its victories" (311). Social change is normalized, absorbed into the status quo, and then forgotten. We still venerate the radicals who fought against Jim Crow and demanded women's suffrage, but who remembers that when a Republican president signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, it culminated a century of radical agitation by the likes of Randolph Bourne and Helen Keller; or

that the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in 1971 represented a victory for the generation of communists and other dissenters persecuted by the FBI, the McCarthyites, and others in government who used secrecy as a shield against civil libertarians.

In this context Brick and Phelps make the important but sometimes forgotten point that marginalized radicals, even when bereft of followers, nevertheless remain, or should remain, majoritarian democrats, because they cling to a powerful sense of “futurity” (9), a confidence that today’s persecuted minority can so transform public sentiment that its ideas, and perhaps even its actual adherents, can play a leading role in the transformation of society. Such hopefulness has not been universal on the left, which explains the lure of the utopian colony, the faith sometimes put in other regimes and Third World social movements, or the outright turn toward domestic authoritarianism, as when, in 1969, the Weathermen shouted “Fight the People.” Nevertheless, the idea that American leftists have often seen themselves as a prophetic minority deriving much energy and focus from the theology and traditions of American Protestantism is undoubtedly foundational, although it is a perspective too often neglected by Brick and Phelps. For example, the authors offer an appreciative discussion of the heroic role played by those pacifists and integrationists linked to the 1940s Fellowship of Reconciliation, but despite the leadership role played by the former Congregational minister A. J. Muste, as well as David Dellinger, a onetime theology student, they offer a narrative that places the FOR largely within the secular left, not the “radical religious vanguard” identified by Joseph Kip Kosek in his 2009 study of Christian nonviolence.¹

Brick and Phelps introduce each chapter with a vignette taken from the life of one or more still marginalized radicals. Almost all are fresh and compelling. Among them are Winfred Lynn, an African American opponent of the segregated military in World War II; Emil Mazey, the union socialist, still in uniform after the war, who led Manila-based soldiers in demonstrations demanding immediate demobilization of the US occupation army; and Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya, a 1960s radical who first achieved fame by threatening to napalm a dog on the University of Pennsylvania campus, but after 2,000 showed up to protest, quickly issued a leaflet: “Congratulations, anti-napalm protest! You have saved the life of an innocent dog. Now your efforts should turn to protesting . . . continued use of this genocidal weapon against the civilian population of a tiny country” (121). Like

¹ Joseph Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York, 2009), 1; and for the more general influence of an ecumenical liberal Protestantism on postwar liberalism and radicalism see David Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” *Journal of American History*, 98/1 (2011), 21–48.

so many activists of his era, Kuromiya was not merely an antiwar protester: he was a pioneer in the gay liberation movement, an advocate of the counterculture, and, as a man of color, soon also identified with the Black Panthers, to whom he bravely advocated “all modes of human sexual self-expression” (123).

Some figures exploded on the American scene and then vanished. One such was the civil rights firebrand Gloria Richardson, a black woman in her forties, who had become radicalized at Howard University in the late Depression years. Embodying an important but often neglected strand of trans-generational 1960s activism, Richardson was committed to nonviolence, but only as a tactic. As the leader of a tumultuous series of demonstrations and marches in Cambridge, Maryland, on the isolated, agricultural shore of the state then often compared to Mississippi, Richardson held little brief for either of the Kennedys, who tried to mediate in her town, nor for the NAACP, who advocated that she lead her partisans from street protests to ballot-box politics. But like that of the vast majority of radicals, Richardson’s activism was contingent upon an almost accidental conjoining of the personal and the political at a particular moment in time and space. When she remarried in 1964 and moved to New York City, her days as the movement leader in a sweltering southern town were over. So too the moral power of her early 1960s radicalism: when black power militant H. Rap Brown visited Cambridge in 1967 and delivered a fiery speech that many thought sparked a night of riot and arson, he famously called violence “as American as cherry pie” (92). In that instance, report Brick and Phelps, the Associated Press nostalgically recalled the “comparatively orderly demonstrations” once led by the now departed Richardson (92).

We know that Richardson was a militant but little of her larger world view. This could hardly be said of C. L. R. James and Claudia Jones, both Trinidadian-born, both advocates of a revolutionary black liberation, and both deported from the United States in the early 1950s, ending up in London, where they were both separately immersed in the Caribbean diaspora and in solidarity with national liberation movements worldwide. But despite all these social and ethnic similarities, a vast gulf stood between James and Jones. Ideology mattered greatly in their lives, a view also advanced by the authors of this book when contemplating the life trajectory of other radicals. Ideas linked to organization and activism have the most potency, which may explain why we remember Jones, James, and Mazey but not Richardson and Kuromiya. Jones was a stalwart communist who thought her pioneering feminism in the West was sustained by the equal rights she believed women enjoyed in Stalin’s Soviet Union. She meanwhile thought American mass culture something close to a fascism that sought to relegate women to a servile domesticity. In contrast, James was an unorthodox Trotskyist who reviled the Soviet Union as a dystopia, but one who also saw within popular culture, either that of Trinidad or the United States, a capacity for democratic empowerment.

Thus, while locked on Ellis Island awaiting deportation, James wrote a book about Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*, in which a totalitarian Captain Ahab is resisted by the mariners, renegades, and castaways found in the crew, whose subversion of his rule is sustained by a joyful shipboard work culture.

In the schema put forth by the authors, the Old Left and the New have a good deal more in common with each other than with those radicalisms that erupted in the years after the 1970s. Once one moves beyond the most orthodox communists and those social democrats who staunchly backed the Cold War, just about everyone else once labeled “Old Left” begins to look familiar. Among them: A. J. Muste, who helped link pacifism and labor radicalism in opposition to the Cold War; Paul Goodman, the tribune of youthful rebellion; Betty Friedan, who once worked for the communist-aligned United Electrical Workers; and Trinidadians Jones and James, whose conjoining of liberation struggles at home (the UK and the US) and abroad ultimately proved far more influential than their views on the “Russian question.”

The New Left would also become as ambitious as the old in seeking to understand and transform the system that oppressed them. But they were reluctant to deploy the old cant and jargon: capitalism and imperialism, even socialism and the working class. As late as 1965 Students for a Democratic Society president Paul Potter evoked this diffidence in an antiwar speech “What kind of a system is it that justifies the United States or any country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for its own purpose? . . . We must name that system. We must name it, describe it, analyze it, understand it and change it” (129).

This search for new language was also apparent in the 1962 Port Huron Statement. Although the phrase “participatory democracy” appears but once in the entire 25,000-word manifesto—much of it consists of a survey of the American scene and a set of social-democratic proposals for reforming society, economy, and the still powerful Jim Crow order in the deep South and urban North—that statement proved electrifying and expansive because it so artfully skirted the boundaries then gently dividing radical from liberal. In Tom Hayden’s draft, for example, the statement advocated “realignment” of the Democratic Party, to make it a more uniformly liberal formation.² In contrast to historians like Michael Kazin and Maurice Isserman, Brick and Phelps recognize that, like the Russian question, the realignment debate, which ran through numerous early New Left organizations, including the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and SDS, was a divide that would for a time separate those propelled toward increasing radicalization from those like Michael Harrington,

² Richard Flacks and Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., *The Port Huron Statement: Sources and Legacies of the New Left’s Founding Manifesto* (Philadelphia, 2015), 3.

Bayard Rustin, and even some remnants of the Communist Party who were committed to a latter-day popular front with one foot firmly planted inside the Democratic Party. Hence the 1964 SDS slogan, “Part of the Way with LBJ,” was not just a contrivance advanced during one campaign season, but arose out of a generation-long debate among socialists and other leftists who sought to become part of the mainstream without relinquishing their oppositional autonomy.

Any effort to link liberals and radicals in a common cause had vanished by the late 1960s. In his forensic account of the racially charged controversy surrounding the 1965 Moynihan Report, Daniel Geary explores how a liberal consensus on bedrock issues like the nature of family, the role of women, and the value of work shattered in what seemed like a historical instant. Following Geary, we will explore the roots of this academic and policy conflict below. In the meantime, Brick and Phelps trace its consequences: in what they label a “crescendo” of hyper-radicalization, the authors of *Radicals in America* offer an autopsy of the late New Left, with careful attention to the ways in which an imploding SDS came to test new extremities in radical marginality. Here we find a careful parsing of the factional warfare within SDS that gave rise to the Weathermen and their Maoist and Black Panther-oriented opponents. Yet, even at this moment when those most committed to 1960s radicalism were Leninizing and Stalinizing their ideas and organizations, a New Left culture was putting down deep roots in the academy, in Hollywood, and in other founts of American culture, as Brick himself has recounted in an earlier book.³ This was the moment when the feminist movement, in both its liberal and its socialist configurations, burst upon the scene and when radical environmentalism became both a movement and a subculture. Neoconservatives would soon conflate the pseudo-Bolshevizing of the old New Left with this cultural and gender experimentation, but Brick and Phelps leave a fully satisfying explanation of this dichotomy largely unexplored.

Instead they devote much space to catalogue a dwindling parade of “vanguard” organizations—Maoist, Trotskyist, Communist, Third Worldish—that comprised the extreme left during the 1970s. It is easy enough to ridicule the vainglorious ambitions of this fringe as the radical hopes of the previous decade were ground down and fragmented into a dozen or more minuscule but impressively named revolutionary organizations. Brick and Phelps find this whole episode rather bizarre, but they also make clear that this ultra-left marginalization was not entirely devoid of contact with social reality. In the first instance, this revival of Marxist organizational forms and ideas was sustained by an Indian summer of labor radicalism that characterized the early 1970s. The “turn to the working-class” was a transnational phenomenon that reflected the explosive

³ Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York, 1998).

contestations engendered by a still potent and well-organized labor movement as it confronted the economic squeeze precipitated by an increasingly globalized capitalism. And second, the left in the 1970s, like Americans more generally, could hardly know that a long season of Reaganite conservatism would soon be upon them. Hence they entitle their chapter on the 1970s “Anticipation,” which captured the mood of many radicals: the 1960s were over, but a “left wing of the possible” (186), to use the phrase of Michael Harrington, would soon emerge. Hence, for some militants, a fixation on organization and ideology. In an era of economic turbulence and the Watergate-era delegitimization of governmental authority, power would soon be lying in the streets.

Since the Roosevelt era the left was able to stake a claim on the imagination of many because radical ideas of transformation seemed plausible when liberalism and its institutions have been ascendant, even if not always in power. But all that ended in the 1980s. There were still plenty of radicals, but they often found that the program for which they fought was one doggedly defending the accomplishments of an earlier era: collective bargaining, abortion rights, integrated public schools, and affirmative action. “Across the 1980s, radicalisms had cropped up, exerted a check on abuses, and won clusters of recruits who helped a left to survive,” write the authors, “but they never achieved a full-bore radicalization, that mounting force of protest that starts to rattle the nerves of the elites” (259). Although a few on the left hoped that the moral and physical collapse of Communism—even the Maoists had abandoned Beijing by the end of the 1970s—might rehabilitate the socialist, or at least the social-democratic, idea, the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to end the possibility that even on the most attenuated level capitalism had competitors that might yet evolve into a genuinely democratic alternative. Academic radicals would not sign on to the triumphalism of a Francis Fukuyama who argued that the collapse of Communism represented an “End of History,” but they did spill much ink in debates over how much social and economic latitude existed among the “varieties of capitalism” now on offer. “For years socialists used to argue among themselves about what kind of socialism they wanted,” wrote Denis MacShane, a sometime British leftist, “but today, the choice of the left is no longer what kind of socialism it wants, but what kind of capitalism it can support.”⁴

All this blurred distinctions between margin and mainstream, between left and liberals. In this last section of their book, which takes us right up to “Black Lives Matter,” the authors seem to have lost the capacity to disentangle whatever remains of a left from the various protest movements and political campaigns that have cropped up and then faded away. Because of the ethno-parochialism

⁴ As quoted in Nelson Lichtenstein, *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor* (Urbana, IL, 2013), 168.

characteristic of some movement-like formations, Brick and Phelps do exclude the Irish American groups that supported their Belfast co-religionists from the leftist tent, likewise the movement linked to the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, whose “Million Man March” of 1995 was the largest black demonstration of that decade.

But even when clearly progressive, one has to ask if such political mobilizations were part of the kind of left that the authors have traced since the end of World War II. Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, which campaigned as a Democratic Party insurgency during the 1980s, sought to be an heir to the civil rights movement and enlisted many radicals who had now turned their organizing talents to issues of economic justice. But was this coalition truly part of the marginal vanguard or was the social democratic program advanced by Jackson’s Rainbow far closer to mainstream liberalism? And what of its character as a political organization when Jackson’s decision to disband it in 1988 left its most ardent supporters homeless? The activism that protested government indifference to the devastating AIDS virus proved far more of a genuine social movement, whose slogan, SILENCE = DEATH, proved liberating within a gay community ravaged by the deadly infection. By winning dignity and respect for those who were both gay and ill, it successfully challenged ancient prejudices while at the same time greatly increasing AIDS research funding and making the Food and Drug Administration and other government agencies far more responsive to a once despised minority. Sympathetic as one must be to these AIDS activists, it seems to me that they were the architects of a successful “campaign,” to use a distinction Richard Rorty advanced in his *Achieving Our Country*, and not a “movement” with a totalizing and universal world view.⁵ There remain many radicals in the twenty-first-century United States, but a left, coherent or fragmented, hardly exists.

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Saul Alinsky would have agreed with Rorty and applauded the demise of any sort of unified leftism. Although Alinsky, who had cut his teeth on popular-front labor and community organizing in Depression-era Chicago, wrote a book in 1946 entitled *Reveille for Radicals*, he disdained the kind of formal ideology or visionary leadership that had characterized either the Communists or their left-wing opponents in the decades after World War II. Alinsky and Fred Ross, his most determined and successful disciple, would spend decades as “organizers,” animating community groups from Back of the Yards Chicago to the barrios of Los Angeles and San Jose. “A good organizer is a social arsonist who goes

⁵ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 114.

around setting people on fire,” wrote Fred Ross in a little book, *Axioms for Organizers*, still used by unionists and activists to this day (quoted in Thompson, at 237). But did Alinsky and Ross, and Cesar Chavez, their most illustrious recruit, stand within the leftist tradition outlined by Brick and Phelps? It is a good question, because in many respects Ross and other organizers of a similar temper preached a radicalism stripped of ideology and diluted by an intensely instrumental organizational ethos.

Ross was born in 1910 to conservative, Protestant parents. His turn to political and social activism came as a college student during the Depression when he got a firsthand look at the class warfare then erupting in the California fields and packing sheds. From the 1930s on he was neither a communist nor an anticommunist, perhaps a useful posture given his employment during the late Depression years as an administrator of the kind of Farm Security Administration camps John Steinbeck celebrated in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ross and the FSA tried to make these transitory communities schools of democratic participation, a task Ross also attempted, under more sinister conditions, as wartime administrator of an Idaho relocation camp for interned Japanese Americans. That job proved impossible, so Ross leaped at the chance to help these same victims of prejudice reenter American life, first in Cleveland, where he placed thousands in labor-starved war industries, and then in San Francisco where he became an advocate for Japanese Americans seeking to regain their property and citizenship rights.

In an engrossing biography, journalist Gabriel Thompson marks 1945 as the turning point in the political career of Fred Ross. That was the moment when, after literally making a wrong automotive turn, Ross encountered the depth and breath of the “Mexican problem,” in southern California’s Citrus Belt, where he found thousands of migrants and immigrants living in a huge barrio composed of shacks and hovels that lined miles of obscure San Bernardino County dirt roads. They were politically impotent, often attended ramshackle segregated schools, and they faced disdain and worse from Anglo officeholders. Ross thought the thin stratum of Mexican American professionals at the head of race advancement organizations a self-serving caste contemptuous of the masses and anxious to curry favor with the white elite. Working now as an organizer for the Community Service Organization, Alinsky’s California affiliate, Ross orchestrated a series of successful voter registration drives, culminating in the 1949 election of Edward Roybal, the first Mexican American in modern times to win a seat on the Los Angeles City Council. In the process Ross and the CSO doubled the number of Latino voters in the city.

This organizing work was intensely local in its focus: winning the vote and running campaigns would get streets paved, bring better schools and parks, and win respect and resources from local government. Aside from a mild sort of ethnic nationalism, any larger appeal to an ideological vision was highly constrained. In

the 1950s this served to keep the McCarthyites at bay. Ross sometimes advertised CSO voter registration projects as “Americanization” programs designed to assimilate an ethnic minority. Compared to the work of the heroic SNCC voter registration activists in Mississippi, Ross and company had it easy in California. CSO never encountered a murderous opposition backed by the full power of the police, the KKK, and the entire white political class: in California there was plenty of local hostility and some red-baiting, but violence was largely absent and the larger political culture of the state trended liberal and integrationist. So while SNCC gravitated toward an increasingly radical interpretation of what would be required to abolish Jim Crow, Ross and his fellow organizers, including Cesar Chavez, whom he “discovered” in 1952, could link their struggle directly with other liberals and frame it in more ostensibly reformist terms.

This hostility toward grand politics continued in the 1960s. Neither Alinsky nor Ross had much respect for the New Left and the feeling was reciprocated. When Ross once interrogated the New Left activist Tom Hayden as to how many recruits the Students for a Democratic Society’s community organizing projects had actually won in Newark, his contempt was confirmed when Hayden’s answer came back zero. As Thompson puts it, channeling Ross’s outlook, “Hanging around a house in the ghetto, where you talked politics and held long meetings, might have been participatory and exciting, but it wasn’t organizing people for action” (165). Ross even thought opposition to the Vietnam war a sideshow that would sap the organizational energy he was determined to channel for other purposes. But what about consciousness raising, turning activists into lifelong radicals, creating a real left? Writing in *Studies on the Left*, one young organizer, who had clashed with Ross in the midst of a 1960s antipoverty project in Syracuse, decried this “Alinsky approach, stressing narrow self-interest, [that] tends to limit any broad vision” (quoted at 168).

Visionary or not, Ross was a Bolshevik when it came to mobilizing the cadre necessary to accomplish the task at hand. He demanded hard work, dedication, and disciplined adherence to the campaign. All this came to a brilliant fruition when Ross took over key organizing work for the United Farm Workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of the ideas Ross drilled into people’s heads was “If you can’t count it, it did not happen.” How many people came to the meeting? How many walked the picket line? Who was still undecided in a forthcoming union election? Such meticulous organizing helped give the UFW an early, stunning victory at the powerful and wealthy DiGiorgio Fruit Company against opposition from both corporate management and the Teamsters, and it also helped make the UFW grape boycott the most successful consumer protest since patriots threw East India Company tea into Boston harbor.

Ross and Alinsky were out of step with the New Left, but their approach more accurately prefigures the protests, political campaigns, and lobby efforts

that Brick and Phelps describe in the post-1980 decades covered by *Radicals in America*. This was an era when the left devoted itself to discrete campaigns while celebrating ethnic consciousness and gender identity. These were also the years in which some trade unions hired a cohort of young radicals and tried to start organizing again. Those recruits were often radicals, but their agenda, if not their imagination, was delimited by the constraints of the organizations for whom they worked. Brick and Phelps often label opposition movements inside the unions a wing of the left. Otherwise they tend to follow the lead of public intellectuals like Dwight Macdonald and C. Wright Mills, who saw the unions as a reluctant but nevertheless accommodating institution within a larger system of bureaucratic industrialism. But if such views ever had validity, they are now clearly obsolete. Trade unionism in twenty-first century America is almost everywhere on the defensive, an increasingly marginal and maligned enterprise that requires radical partisans and unorthodox tactics to win recognition from and participation within the nation's mainstream political culture.⁶

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However, race, not class, has been the decisive issue dividing radicals from both liberals and conservatives in postwar America. A signal instance of such conflict, and thereafter a marker in the culture wars and a litmus test calibrating political allegiance, came with the 1965 publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, popularly known as the Moynihan Report. Daniel Geary has written a superb history of the controversy that engulfed the report written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary in the Labor Department. Geary's *Beyond Civil Rights* is a mature and fair-minded reconsideration of an explosive ideological and cultural contestation. Geary is a critic of the formulations and ideas Moynihan made famous—the “tangle of pathologies” that supposedly crippled the urban black family, the unexamined patriarchy that even liberal Catholics like Moynihan saw as natural to the world of work and family, and the programmatic ambiguity with which this Labor Department intellectual concluded his report.

But such a critique is not the main point of his book. Rather Geary offers a well-textured study of how and why this short, government-printed report came into being and then became such a lightning rod for American intellectuals, radical and liberal, nationalist and integrationist, Protestant and Catholic, black feminists and white, and so many others writing in the 1960s and virtually every decade thereafter. The very ambiguity and “maddening inconsistency” (6) at

⁶ For more on this see Nelson Lichtenstein, “Why Labor Moved Left,” *Dissent* (Summer 2015), 26–33.

the core of the report advanced its centrality as a crucial text within American political culture. Was family instability primarily a cause or a consequence of racial inequality? Were the “social pathologies” of African Americans race-specific, rooted in a history of slavery and racial discrimination, or were they a product of class oppression, based on the economic and work life experience of the urban poor? How important was the family itself as an incubator of social stability? Such queries, once directed solely at residents of the ghetto, today seem highly appropriate to a multicultural working class, and this includes many blue-collar whites, whose standard of living remains stagnant and whose “pathologies” seem increasingly manifest.

The initial policy/political dispute over the Moynihan Report was actually a short-lived affair. In March 1965 he finished a closely held draft that in June would serve as the basis for President Lyndon Johnson’s Howard University speech “Freedom Is Not Enough” and that became known to the public in August at almost the same moment as the Watts riot, and by November of that year the administration had disowned the report in the face of mounting criticism. But if rejected as a policy formulation, the issues raised in the report quickly mutated into fierce debate over the source of continued African American economic difficulty and the appropriate remedies. Although Geary takes pains to describe the report itself as an ambiguous document, written by a New Deal liberal who called for “national action” to advance Negro equality, it soon became a marker in the rapid crystallization of an assertive black consciousness on the one hand and a neoconservative ethos on the other.

Moynihan himself was an ambitious and well-connected policy entrepreneur who collaborated with a wide variety of other social theorists, including some who were outright radicals and others who, like him, were New Deal liberals and advocates of American racial pluralism. Thus Geary highlights the importance of how the 1963 study of New York ethnic groups, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, written by Moynihan and the sociologist Nathan Glazer, prefigured many of the internal contradictions within the Moynihan Report itself. Here Moynihan analogizes the urban experience of African Americans to the integrative trajectory of other immigrant groups, a species of liberal sociology which even in the early 1960s was coming under attack. Moreover, Geary finds that Moynihan could never resolve the tension between the stark, historically rooted existence of economic discrimination against African Americans, which seemingly led to family instability, and the hypothesis advanced both in the *Melting Pot* book and in the report: that the solution to this sociocultural problem was not entirely amenable to state action or economic redress.

Here Geary’s interrogation of the work of the black sociologists E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth Clark is revealing, because their own writings on the African American family prefigured that of Moynihan, although in Frazier’s case this

devaluation of the integrity of the black family arose in part out the academic conflict he waged against the mid-century anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who emphasized the African roots of black culture, including its extended and sometimes matriarchal family structure. Frazier rejected this anthropological metahistory, but of greater importance, writes Geary, is that while both Frazier and Moynihan wanted government to fund many more jobs for black men, Frazier, a socialist, saw this program arising out of a mass protest movement while Moynihan put his faith in what Geary calls “technocratic social engineering” (61). This divided radicals from liberals even during those few early 1960s years when they both seemed to hold as valid the same social and economic objectives.

When *The Negro Family* first appeared, civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King and Whitney Young of the Urban League endorsed the report because the focus on the urban North and the call for action beyond formal civil equality seemed to backstop their own strategic shift toward a compensatory economic program to advance a new phase of the movement. But such praise would soon come to an abrupt halt. The earliest and most trenchant attack on Moynihan came from William Ryan, a fellow Catholic liberal who had much experience in trying to reform Boston schools and their stolid, racist bureaucracy. Ryan was the first to characterize the main thrust of the report as “blaming the victim” (96), a critique soon widely publicized by mainstream Protestants at the National Council of Churches and through *Christianity and Crisis*, the leading journal of liberal Protestantism. Although Geary properly emphasizes the Moynihan Report controversy as a spur to neoconservatism, it also turned some liberals leftward. As one Protestant leader put it in his repudiation of the report, “a revolution in human freedom cannot be engineered” (quoted at 101). And the fact that Moynihan saw the military as an institution suitable for building black manhood hardly helped his case during the era of the Vietnam War.

In contrast to these liberal Protestants, Catholic intellectuals were much more favorable to Moynihan because they validated the family as the basic unit of society to a greater extent than did Protestants. Moynihan wanted government policy to sustain the patriarchal family. Like his own spouse, Moynihan thought mothers should stay home and mind the kids. And in a memorandum summarizing his report, he advised Lyndon Johnson, “We must not rest until every able-bodied Negro male is working. Even if we have to displace some females” (69). Such policy prescriptions soon generated a feminist rejoinder quite as vociferous as that hurled at the report by any black male militant, whose own championship of a new racial manhood often paralleled that prescribed by Moynihan. Geary surveys this outcry in all its variegated forms, black and white, male and female, in Congress or from the new consciousness-raising circles. Black feminists were in the forefront: “The term ‘matriarchy’ connotes power,” wrote Brenda Eichelberger, a founder of the National Black Feminist Organization.

“What power do black women have except to scrub Miss Ann’s floors?” (quoted at 159).

“The reason we are in the bag we are in isn’t because of my mama, it’s because of what they did to my mama” (quoted at 119). That’s Stokely Carmichael, the SNCC leader, denouncing the Moynihan Report in a 1966 speech which also popularized the slogan “Black Power” and signaled the radicalization of one segment of the civil rights movement. With Charles Hamilton, Carmichael would coin the phrase “institutional racism” in their 1967 book *Black Power*, to denote how African Americans were systematically oppressed by the very structures of society and economy. But Black Power advocates would not make their mark on the left as radicals who seriously challenged white power, but rather as tribunes of self-representation, as men and women who would no longer allow integrationist liberals or academic experts to define their own problems, prospect, or culture. For both its critics and its proponents, therefore, the Moynihan Report shifted much ideological discourse from a debate over economic justice to one intensely focused on cultural identity and its validators.

This had a dramatic impact on sociology, a discipline well understood by Geary, given his authorship of a notable C. Wright Mills biography.⁷ In 1952 Lionel Trilling had complained that sociology was replacing literature as the venue in which American morals and manners were most fruitfully and influentially dissected. And that discipline was indeed well represented at Port Huron among the young radicals who debated their famous statement. Geary therefore offers a fascinating chapter entitled “The Death of White Sociology,” which argues that Moynihan’s report crystalized a debate, still raging in academe and throughout the culture, over who was or is qualified to produce racial knowledge. The precipitous decline in the status of sociology, once the queen of the social sciences, dates from the assaults that after 1966 so determinedly challenged the authority of sociologists like Moynihan, Glazer, James Q. Wilson, and James S. Colman. The attacks on their professional authority and moral standing, which included charges of racism and elitism, paved the way for the turn toward neoconservatism on the part of many of these same figures, Moynihan included.

When Moynihan became an adviser to the Nixon Administration, he offered a memo asserting that the time had come “when the issue of race could benefit from a period of ‘benign neglect’” (quoted at 201). Geary argues, perhaps too generously, that Moynihan’s infamous phrase was less a call for the elimination of government programs designed to ameliorate the social and economic conditions of African American life than a myopic effort to quiet the acrimonious racial rhetoric then reaching a fever pitch. Moynihan had in mind recent speeches by

⁷ Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley, 2009).

Vice President Spiro Agnew and other administration conservatives, but his main targets were the black militants and their white allies who soon came to argue that “benign neglect” was merely a euphemism for “malignant paternalism” (203). Indeed, the outcry over the meaning of Moynihan’s phrase replicated the polarizing ideological impact of the 1965 *Negro Family* report, with some academics and activists who had originally backed the report, like Kenneth Clark and Whitney Young, now denouncing Moynihan’s 1970 memo as a “flagrant and shameful political document” (203).

When it comes to the history of the American left, the Moynihan Report proved a turning point that ill-prepared radicals for the turbulent economic storms ahead. The fight over the meaning of the report shifted much ideological discourse from a debate over the structure of the political economy to one intensely focused on ethnoracial identities, gender consciousness, and family structure. This cultural turn would prove essential to a redefinition and a reanimation of what it meant to be a radical during the next half-century, but it decentered and devalued the Marxism and the class analysis that had once provided the ideological framework for how American leftists thought about the grand structures of the world they inhabit. Paul Potter’s 1965 injunction to “name the system” and then understand and change it has largely gone unfulfilled.