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Meg Jacobs and Julian E. Zelizer

## Comment: **Swinging Too Far to the Left**

The 1970s are undergoing a dramatic revival among historians. What was once thought of as a decade in which ‘nothing happened’, sandwiched between the liberal 1960s and the conservative 1980s, has turned into a period that is considered to be a real turning point in American history. As the historian Bruce Schulman wrote,

the Seventies transformed American economic and cultural life as much as, if not more than, the revolutions in manners and morals of the 1920s and the 1960s. The decade reshaped the political landscape more dramatically than the 1930s. In race relations, religion, family life, politics, and popular culture, the 1970s marked the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time.<sup>1</sup>

Historians have focused on two issues to demonstrate the importance of the decade. The first is the conservative mobilization that took place in the 1970s, which established the political foundation for the next three decades. It was in this decade that Americans moved to the right. While conservative activists and voters had been around for a long time, there were major organizational changes — from grassroots mobilization to shifts in the electorate to party reform — in the 1970s that allowed for the flourishing of a conservative movement. The second is a shift in mindset away from the ‘grand expectations’ of the postwar years, in response to the economic stagnation and inflation that gripped the nation and brought to an end three decades of economic growth. In a new volume about the 1970s, a group of talented historians show how, in these and other areas ranging from ethnic identity to urban politics, the decade transformed America and made it ‘rightward bound’.<sup>2</sup>

The rediscovery of the 1970s involves more than simply adding facts and figures to stories about contemporary American history. By shifting our focus of attention from the 1960s to the 1970s, historians are reorienting our broader narrative of the past by challenging the traditional historiographical claim about the nation moving steadily toward more government and greater liberal values. If the 1970s is a true turning point — and the decade was defined by a massive mobilization of the right — then historians are forced to acknowledge the depth of conservative politics in the twentieth century and to

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1 Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York 2001), xii.

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

look back to the earlier part of the century in order to understand where this rightward political outburst emerged from.

The articles see the 1970s as a pivotal decade, but they offer a very different perspective for understanding these years. In short, the authors do not perceive the 1970s as being marked solely, or even largely, by a shift to the right. Instead, they emphasize the ways in which there was a continuation, expansion, and widespread embrace, both at the grass roots and among policy-makers, of New Deal and Great Society liberalism. The articles do not deny the existence of conservatism, but instead look closely at the enduring, and indeed growing, strength of liberalism, not just its decline, and the influence of a robust liberalism on the rise of the Right in these formative years.

Collectively, the authors highlight several key changes in American political culture to make their case. The first is that personal issues became central political questions, in some ways even more so than they had in the 1960s. According to Joshua Zeitz, many different groups across the ideological spectrum experienced a personal awakening and understood that everyday questions — from health and reproduction to girls' sports teams to musical preferences — were legitimate subjects for public debate. They claimed that government should guarantee individuals the needed autonomy to pursue personal development, variously defined. In formal political channels and at the grass roots, causes such as feminism garnered massive political support, which transformed everyday interpersonal interactions.

The second development was the proliferation of activism. Looking at civil rights, Stephen Tuck makes a compelling argument that activism did not die out after the 1960s. Indeed, what happened instead was that civil rights activism expanded into new arenas that moved beyond the 1960s fights over public integration and voting rights. 'The overall story of African-American protest that emerges during the 1970s,' Tuck writes, 'is not so much one of fragmentation as one of proliferation.' Civil rights activism turned to such issues as the election of more African American candidates in cities and the rights of prisoners. Groups who were previously marginal in the civil rights movement, such as welfare mothers and African American feminists, gained stature and a political voice as they made concrete legislative gains. In Nevada, for example, Tuck found that welfare activists overturned spending cuts.

Not only did the activism of the 1960s persist, but the third issue presented in the articles shows the continuation into the 1970s, and even normalization, of direct-action techniques as a regular part of politics. Simon Hall demonstrates how activists on the left, and increasingly on the right, used the political protest styles (such as marches, sit-ins, and more) from the 1960s to advance new causes across the political spectrum in the 1970s. According to Hall, the 1960s and 1970s cannot be seen as separate; rather, the 1970s were an extension of the 1960s, as a wide range of activists on the left and the right adopted tactics drawn from the civil rights movement to advance causes as disparate as anti-busing and gay rights.

Finally, the social regulation of the 1960s persisted well into the 1970s and

even found new champions on the right. Whereas historians have traditionally written about the decline of the New Deal order after the 1968 election, Gareth Davies makes the excellent point that proponents of government activism survived and even thrived in the newly expanded regulatory apparatus of post-Great Society Washington. Looking at federal education, Davies explores how federal aid to education, which the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) jump-started, received increased funding throughout the 1970s. Once the program was passed, opponents became supporters, unwilling to turn down federal money that would have been hard to raise locally, especially amid the tax revolts of the period. Supporters of ESEA were able to prevent Presidents Nixon and Ford from consolidating specialized programs into block grants and cutting funding. Because of the nature of regulatory policy-making, in which funds are granted on conditions of compliance with federal statutes, the education funds affected social policy not only in the area of integration of Southern schools, but also in matters such as bi-lingual education, programs for girls, and accommodation of special needs children, including the disabled. Equally important, Davies examines how conservatives themselves came to embrace a role for the federal government in education, in large part as a response to the shift in political culture enacted by the civil rights movement. Big-government conservatism, according to this argument, came of age in the 1970s — as opposed to under the presidency of George W. Bush — because the right had no choice but to come to terms with the continued influence of liberalism in the bureaucracy and in the country at large.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate that indeed the liberalism of the 1960s lasted into the 1970s. At a basic level, the decade witnessed the acceptance of a fundamental shift in American culture toward one in which all people have an equal voice and the right to exercise that voice politically. And at the same time, rather than retrenching, the American government apparatus continued to grow and support this change in political culture, as is most clear in education policy. Thus, these authors suggest, it was only in the 1970s that a decisive and permanent shift to a rights-based liberalism occurred, taking on a lasting institutional and cultural form.

While the authors make a very important contribution by demonstrating the continuities between the 1960s and 1970s, there are some problems with their collective portrait of the decade. We would argue that if readers looked only at these articles, we could not make sense of what happened in the 1970s. Indeed, they could miss the central political pressures of the era.

By focusing on the balance between liberalism and conservatism, we believe that the authors overlook some fundamental structural changes that were crucial to enabling and even furthering this ideological contestation. There were key institutional factors at work that allowed liberalism to survive in an increasingly conservative age. Political reforms in the 1970s, for instance, fragmented political power in Congress and allowed multiple points of access into the political system. The breakup of the committee system empowered rank-and-file members of every political caucus and strengthened subcommittees.

Reforms in the process by which both parties selected presidential candidates likewise allowed liberal voices to retain influence in Democratic Party politics at a time when much of the Democratic electorate was moving more toward the center. Thus, rather than a deeply felt and widely shared ideological loyalty to liberalism that survived the 1960s, changes in the institutional structures of politics — particularly the emerging legislative process — help to account for giving activists in the left, center, and right a voice in governance.

Another issue that the authors do not address is: what did this activism yield? While it is crucial to correct the impression that liberal activism died in the 1970s, we need to consider what the outcome of the protest was. Simply showing that liberalism persisted is not enough. We need to know in what areas liberalism survived, and what impact those pockets of politics had on the broader public. The authors sometimes fail to provide a sense of proportion by taking persistent liberalism outside the broader framework of politics. For instance, Stephen Tuck makes a convincing case that civil rights activists gained an increase in African American representation in urban politics. Yet they did so at a time when suburbanization and changes in the economy devastated urban areas and left them less politically powerful. While liberals were able to entrench themselves in existing bureaucracies, changes in the fiscal condition of government and the emergence of conservative political power stifled the creation of robust new social programs. Moreover, the growth of pre-existing programs ultimately limited the ability of the government — in a conservative age with fiscal restraint — to take on new social initiatives desired by liberals. By 2008, the government failed to address many social issues not just because of conservative opposition, but because pre-existing domestic spending took up a large portion of the budget and the energy of liberals was often focused on protecting the status quo rather than policy innovation. Thus the expansion of one program could come at the cost of others.

Moreover, the authors might go too far in downplaying the significant rise of conservative activism that did occur in these years. Throughout the 1970s, conservatism gained a very strong organizational infrastructure. Activists formed political action committees to finance right-wing candidates and established think tanks to promote their ideas. Average citizens were mobilized and entrepreneurs developed direct mail systems that allowed conservatives to raise money from a broad base of contributors. The ability of Republicans to penetrate traditionally Democratic southern constituencies was dramatic; once white southern voters went Republican, the trend appeared irreversible and has had profound electoral consequences. In Congress and at the state level, conservatives placed new questions on the national agenda and captured the leadership of the GOP.

Finally, by concentrating on evaluating whether liberalism or conservatism was more powerful in the 1970s, these articles fail to address the fundamental question of conservatism in this era, one that historians are only now beginning to consider: how did conservatives actually govern? Between Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan, there was a fundamental shift, in the electorate

and in policy, to the right. The articles are most useful, though, in reminding us that there was no quick and easy undoing of the liberal state and political culture that was born in the Great Depression and came to maturity in the Great Society. Thus we need to ask new questions about how conservatives, once in office, exercise power. Given the fundamental tension between an ideology of small government and the political realities of governance, conservatives from Richard Nixon on had to engage in an endless navigation between ideological convictions, some of which were shared by the electorate, and the demands of a rights-based politics in which citizens expected a government that was responsive and supportive. These articles are important in reminding us of the institutional and cultural persistence of liberalism well into the 1970s, and even until today. And thus we need to ask fewer questions about the decline of liberalism and the rise of the right and more questions about the actual realities of conservatives in power.

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