

America Transformed: Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change, 1941–2001. By *Richard M. Abrams*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xix + 345 pp. Notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-521-86246-9.

Reviewed by Howard Brick

To make sense of wrenching changes in American society, culture, and politics since the United States entered World War II, this engaging, synthetic account by Berkeley historian Richard M. Abrams presents a potent narrative of revolution and counterrevolution. At first glance, the long span under consideration divides neatly, almost evenly, into two periods: the first driven by “welfare state” and antidiscrimination policies; the second witnessing the return of “small government,” pro-business and pro-market principles, along with “traditionalist” resistance to egalitarian, choice-maximizing social and cultural change. Thus, this book belongs with other recent studies that focus attention on the “right turn” in American life occurring over the course of the 1970s. Abrams unabashedly calls the second period “reactionary”—a good word. It comes, of course, with the corresponding judgment of prior changes as “progress,” and Abrams affirms his affiliation with liberalism of the Harry Truman variety, which he sees as the guiding thread of the first period. This book is good history and it is, at the same time, determinedly political—a combination, posing no difficulty in principle, that grants the book its vigor. Yet as Abrams knows, historical matters are messier than a straight scheme of advance and retreat allows. How well do themes of “revolution” and “counterrevolution” stand up, when *both* periods show *mixed* signs of liberalizing change, persistent old ways, undemocratic trends, and varied forms of popular protest?

Setting the baseline for his study, Abrams portrays in retrospect “the America of the forties and fifties . . . [as] virtually an alien country” (p. 6). At that time, depression and war had left scarcity-minded Americans with a deep yearning for security, conformist inclinations attuned to maintaining custom and authority, and an uncomplicated nationalism that largely masked deep racial and gender discrimination. A great transformation in social structure and sensibility ensued in the decades to come, led by “eight revolutions”: affluence (and a marked decline in scarcity motivations); U.S.

assumption of international power; the rise of a giant military establishment; the growth of large, concentrated, and powerful corporations; strides toward racial equality, along with profound moves toward recasting gender roles and relaxing strictures on sexual behavior (including compulsory heterosexuality); and, finally, the “demise of privacy,” defined by the lessening power of shame, pervasive publicity, and the mounting surveillance of personal life by government and business agencies. It is no news that conditions and precedents for many of these trends can be found in decades prior to 1940, but the case for a fundamental shift of some sort after that date is plausible. Still, the eight revolutions neither neatly coordinate with each other nor universally follow a common, up-and-down, wavelike pattern of progress and reaction.

That’s why Abrams’s eight-revolution theme sits alongside another and, in terms of his political convictions, more decisive schema defined by “the collapse of the liberal Democratic coalition—and its replacement by a radically regressive Republican coalition” (p. 200). The two models do not faultlessly plot onto one another. Appearing to verify the revolution–counterrevolution model, the trend to “affluence” went into reverse in the 1970s when a new economic crisis led many Americans back to a “zero-sum” (scarcity) mentality that resisted further progress in drawing oppressed groups into the mainstream. The new economic stagnation led in turn, by the new century, to a striking decline in social indicators of well-being, compared to other highly developed countries. Yet, on the other hand, the most dramatic advances by women and gays (and in some ways for racial inclusion according to a “diversity” standard) took off only in the 1970s and, despite resistance, “backlash,” and some reverses, continued mounting through the 1990s. Abrams concludes, then, that the ascendancy of Reaganite politics did not really dismantle the “revolutions” (surely, it did not reverse militarization and corporatization) but rather “halted and partly reversed half a century of movement of the country toward liberal priorities” (p. 291). Even this formulation, however, continues to fudge on the problem of understanding social structures and developmental trends that combine the inclusiveness and diversity that seem to liberalize our social-cultural mores with economic norms and facts that evoke William Graham Sumner’s pseudo-Darwinian struggle for survival.

Aside from such thematic difficulties, Abrams narrates the rise of the Republican Right to power with finesse. He provides an excellent account of the new shape of business-community organizing and propaganda in the 1970s, aptly assails the widespread “failure syndrome” (which denies any efficacy to government regulatory, relief, and antipoverty programs), and lucidly outlines recent trends in corporate mergers, management hierarchies, and financial operations. His insistence that the New Left shares culpability with the Right for tearing down the structures of liberal government strikes me as more a matter of political reflex than of sound evidence or argument. The same goes for his conventional view that the country has suffered deep wounds from the “collapse of consensus” and cultural “fragmentation” since the 1960s. Abrams insists that liberal progress was wholly a result of “elite” initiatives, whose integrity he wishes to defend against either the left-wing activism of the 1960s or the right-wing populism of the 1980s and beyond. He promotes an antimajoritarian interpretation of Supreme Court decisions, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, and administrative innovations, such as affirmative action, measures he thinks could not have been driven by popular sentiment, which usually takes a conservative cast. What’s missing from his account are the social movements predating court decisions: A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement and other mobilizations prior to Montgomery go unmentioned. Abrams misses too the new historiography, such as Meg Jacobs’s *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (2005) and Nancy MacLean’s *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (2006), depicting the profound grassroots impulses that provided the motive and muscle for welfare-state and affirmative-action policies that no elite invented or established entirely on its own. Here lies a story of democratic action capable of forcing change while also arousing the ire of conservative power-holders in government, business, and community life, and it cannot be ignored in seeking the solution of Abrams’s analytical quandaries.

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