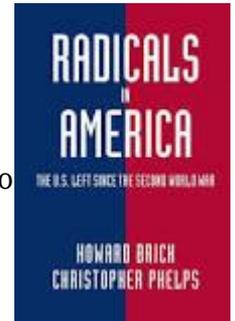


# Radical America

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The American left is today confronted with a situation it has not dealt with in some time—something approaching broader political relevance. From the rise of Occupy to Black Lives Matter to the Bernie Sanders campaign, movements of the left are having a sustained impact on American politics that they have not had for decades. After long years of condescending neglect, the mainstream press is now beginning to pay attention to what the publications of the left have to say. Underlying all of this, as revealed by examinations of public opinion, is a shift to the left among the younger generation that is nigh unprecedented.



For Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, authors of *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left Since the Second World War*, this is part of a familiar pattern. In their generous and expansive history of the American left, they trace the left's journey from "margins" to "mainstream" and back again. The result is a highly readable narrative covering seven decades of American history, written with a scope and inclusiveness rarely attempted in other treatments of the subject. Participants in the newest left will learn much from this book about the tradition that they inherit; however, the authors stop short of attempting to analyze what the left got wrong and how it could have done better (aside from basically consensus judgments, such as that the Weathermen were worthless wreckers). While the kind of ecumenism that results no doubt contributes to the generosity of interpretation that characterizes the book, the result seems rather less hopeful than the authors likely intended. Without an analysis of how things could possibly have been different, had different choices been made, we are left with a bleak image of inevitable defeats. This lends a kind of tension to the book, between the hopeful and expansive recounting of previous radicalisms and a refusal to try and imagine how they could have avoided their eventual disintegration.

Brick and Phelps' story begins with a brief recounting of the Depression-era left and its dissolution in the cauldron of the early Cold War. They open with the story of Emil Mazey, a socialist autoworker who organized soldier dissidence during the war and would become a key ally of Walter Reuther in the United Auto Workers. This is a device repeated in each chapter, as the authors choose some figure, usually someone relatively unknown, and use their biography as a window on that era of the left. It's a nice touch, one that illustrates how the political dynamics of an era could be concentrated in an individual person.

The portrait of the left in the midst of the war years establishes many of the themes that will repeat in subsequent chapters. First, and most impressively, is the sheer scope of the authors' coverage. The traditional players—the Communist Party and the Popular Front—are here, but so are the radical pacifists who opposed the war, the breakaway Trotskyists led by Max Shachtman, and prickly intellectuals like Dwight MacDonald. The inclusion of all of these currents necessitates a certain lack of depth in dealing with each of them, but the portrait of the diversity and breadth of the left make up for it.

In this opening section, the authors' capacity for insightful political judgments is also on display. This comes through with particular clarity in their discussion of Depression-era internationalism. The historiographical judgment on leftist internationalism in these years has been largely negative. Even as scholars have lauded the Popular Front defense of the Spanish Revolution, the obeisance shown toward Russia, above all by the Communist Party but emulated by much of the rest of the left, has been judged a disaster, tying American radicalism to an authoritarian regime with its own

interests and providing succor to the reactionary charge that radicalism is un-American. New Left scholars, in particular, often seem to have written under the shadow of this accusation, with their various excavations of indigenous American radicalisms mustered to provide an implicit rebuttal to this charge. Brick and Phelps provide a more tempered treatment of the issue, noting that identification with struggles in other countries often invigorated American radicals, liberating them from parochial myths of American exceptionalism.

The succeeding chapters largely track the rise and fall of the New Left, the story that forms the primary narrative and analytic arc of the book. Brick and Phelps are attentive to the rumblings of upheaval that sounded throughout the supposedly placid fifties, noting that everything from Beat nonconformity to left success in institutions like the Highlander school presaged turbulent times ahead.

Bricks and Phelps center their portrait of the New Left on Students for a Democratic Society and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They argue that while SDS is often accorded prize of place in histories of the New Left, SNCC was no less important and contributed just as many figures and ideas to the radicalization of the late sixties as did SDS. It's a compelling interpretation—many of the most significant lines of New Left political development, from the Black Power socialism of James Foreman to the lunacy of the Weathermen, evolved out of tendencies within one of these two groups. The emphasis on SNCC and SDS together also illuminates how a number of minority white groups, such as the Third World Women's Alliance, which grew out of feminist agitation in SNCC, shared a basic political milieu with SDS and its better-studied offspring.

The emphasis on SNCC and SDS is hardly limiting, however, and *Radicals* is characteristically expansive in tracking the evolution of cultural radicalism in these years, the development of ecological activism, as well as movements like gay liberation and the American Indian Movement. Rarely has the history of American radicalism been written with such thoroughness.

Yet this breadth of narrative comes at a cost, it must be said. Concerned to draw the wide-ranging and chaotic history of the left into a single, medium-length volume inevitably means sacrificing depth of analysis. Reading *Radicals*, it is easy to be convinced that this sacrifice was a wise one, as the range of research and the inclusive spirit ensure that the book will contain new information even for veteran students of left history.

The costs of such an approach, however, are more severe than they at first appear. Brick and Phelps' largely descriptive approach to the history of the left ends up abandoning the necessary task of helping to chart a future course for the left. The conclusion makes an attempt at this work, providing a framework by which the failings of past lefts may be redeemed for the future. Using a skillful retelling of the struggle for disability rights as scaffolding, the authors argue that the success of past radicalisms can be measured in the present invisibility of their victories. Today, the ubiquity (though, unfortunately, still far from universality) of sidewalk on-ramps, public transit elevators, and similar accommodations masks the fierce insurgency that was necessary on the part of disabled people and their comrades to win such reforms. Brick and Phelps argue that this kind of process has always characterized the history of the American left. Even as it has faded from the mainstream back into the margins, its struggles have left remnants, which have themselves become part of the mainstream.

This is undeniably true, and a valuable antidote to the easy cynicism that writes off previous political generations as abject failures. At the same time, one must admit that these failures have come with real costs, both for the left and for people suffering under the manifold forms of oppression in America. Today, one can witness the legacies of the defeat of the left everywhere, from the suicide and opioid epidemics consuming working class white communities to the municipal vampirism in

black suburbs to unrestrained slaughter of the American war machine. All of these phenomena today are, in part, a consequence of previous lefts' defeats in their confrontations with state and capital.

If these kinds of morbid symptoms were not inevitable developments, it means they could have been stopped at some point. To begin to identify such points, political judgment is needed about what could have been done differently, by whom, and when. This is the kind of judgment that is lacking throughout *Radicals in America*. To be sure, an overabundance of these sorts of judgments has afflicted any number of partisan histories of the left, which overflow with contentions that, had a certain line been followed, all kinds of nastiness could have been averted. At this point, more of that kind of history is hardly needed. But some kind of analysis of what paths were once open, but not taken, is needed to redeem the history Brick and Phelps recount. Put simply, if a future left is to evade the marginality that eventually consumed all previous ones, some sense of how that might be done has to be found in their histories.

This is a harsh judgment on a generous book, and it would be churlish to end on this note. Brick and Phelps have gathered precious histories together to create a resource that will be invaluable in acquainting future radicals with the tradition in which they stand. The American left has long deserved a book like this, and *Radicals* fulfills its promise with tact and nuance. For young activists radicalizing today, curious about how previous generations have tried to make a "political revolution," they could scarcely do better than to dive into this book.