

Recognizing the Counterrevolution!

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2/22/1987 President Reagan
Nancy Reagan Bill Clinton
and Hillary Clinton walking
in Cross Hall during a dinner
Honoring Nation's
Governors

We have needed this book. Stephen Steinberg has produced a brilliant overview of the decades-long campaign by business and the organized right to reverse the victories of the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. Steinberg is, I think, well suited to this task by his life-long study of the American system of racial oppression, especially the oppression of African Americans, and by his passionate opposition to that system.

What makes this book so valuable is the force of its argument about how the counter-revolution gains by moving relentlessly from one civil rights rollback to the next, culminating in the ongoing Republican campaign to limit voting rights, especially the voting rights of African Americans. Think of the daring of that campaign. Instead of adapting their agenda to attract a diversifying electorate, the Republican Party, confronted by unfavorable demographic trends, especially a burgeoning left-leaning youth vote, launches a parallel campaign to construct an obstacle course that will make it more difficult for those targeted segments of the electorate to vote because they are unlikely to vote for the right.

But while this development is staggering for what it reveals about the vulnerability of democracy in the United States, it is not actually new. Indeed, the political history of the United States can be told as a centuries-long series of struggles over democratic rights and especially over the core element of a democratic polity, the widespread and secure access to the franchise. Many of the institutional

arrangements that have recently been singled out by commentators for their distorting effects on democracy, for example, the Electoral College, the U.S. Senate, and the Supreme Court, originated in efforts by American elites, especially the slaveholding Southern planter class, to limit the reach and impact of democratic representation, most notably in the House of Representatives, the "People's House."

Steinberg directs us to see a similar contest driving many of the policy initiatives of the past fifty years. This time the forces of reaction have been directed not at democratic publics as a whole, but at African Americans and at the historic advances achieved in response to the campaigns of the Black Freedom movement that erupted in the 1950s. The highpoint was reached in the 1960s with the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But there were other perhaps less spectacular achievements that improved the lives of Black Americans. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), for example, a program that provided cash assistance to poor single mothers and their children, expanded, and the discretion of program operatives to refuse aid was limited by a series of court decisions. Other programs that provided food assistance and health care also grew in response to Black unrest.

But these victories prompted the beginning of what Steinberg calls "counter-revolution." Republican leaders took advantage of the growing white backlash to campaign with what became known as the "southern strategy." In 1968, the Democrats lost the presidency, and during subsequent Republican regimes the counter-revolution escalated. Affirmative action initiatives intended to improve Black employment and educational prospects were reversed. And when Bill Clinton, a Democrat, gained the presidency, he championed the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that inaugurated the trend toward mass incarceration. Two years later, Clinton was promising "to end welfare as we know it," which he actually did in 1996, when the liberalized AFDC income-maintenance program was replaced by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act, imposing new work requirements and time limits on aid.

This was not just about race. Each of these policy shifts also generated opportunities for profit that attracted interest-group support. Efforts at improving schools morphed into efforts to replace public schools with for-profit charter schools, for example. Efforts to "deconcentrate poverty" became efforts to get rid of public housing in favor of gentrified developments that provided far less below-market-rate housing for the people displaced. Still, the opportunities for profit created by these reform initiatives were intertwined with the fact that the victims of the policies were largely Black people and that it was the achievements of the Black Freedom movement that were being reversed. By highlighting the political deployment of racial animus, Steinberg helps us to see these developments as features of the simmering race war that characterizes American politics.

But while racist rhetoric certainly accompanied these initiatives, the shifts in policy targeted not only Black people. Steinberg does not say this, but what was unfolding behind the screen provided by the fractiousness of race politics was a huge business mobilization to roll back the policy initiatives of both the New Deal and the Great Society. It was as if business interests had simply been biding their time, waiting for the politically propitious moment and the issues that would cloud the class content of the business campaign. Racism provided the shield that made the neoliberal turn possible.

Steinberg does us a service by highlighting the similar agenda behind the policy changes that weakened civil rights accomplishments. But for me, the highpoints of Steinberg's book consist of his discussion of the rationales offered by some academics and neoconservative intellectuals for the rollbacks of civil rights advances. To put it bluntly, when the political opportunities emerged, social scientists and other intellectuals dug into their academic toolboxes to find the theories and language that justified reversing the gains won by the Black Freedom movement. Daniel Patrick Moynihan,

Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz come quickly to mind because they are famous, and they are famous in part because they were such successful opportunists, handmaidens of the counter-revolutionary movement of their day. But lots of less well-known intellectuals joined the fight as research opportunities and federal largesse for projects that justified the counter-revolutionary trend became available.

The clear and simple pattern in these rationales was captured at the time by William Ryan, who wrote a critical and angry book called *Blaming the Victim*. The title says it all. It is true that poverty and social exclusion have bad effects on people. They can sap them of ambition and energy, create the stresses that erode family life, discourage longer-term planning in favor of more immediate satisfactions, and so forth. But it is too easy to reverse the causality, to argue that it is the lack of ambition, frayed family relations, and the pursuit of immediate satisfactions that *causes* poverty and exclusion. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in fact wants to have it both ways. Once upon a time, he argued, individual and family pathology were caused by slavery and Jim Crow. But now, the pathologies caused by economic and social circumstance perpetuate themselves. In other words, what we call the culture of poverty reproduces itself without poverty. The solution can no longer be to merely eliminate the economic and social conditions that cause poverty. Rather a system of authority capable of directly changing the behaviors and ideas of the poor has to intervene.

The perspective is chilling. It tells us why Black Power is necessary not only to protect the future of Black people, but to protect the future of democracy. Steinberg ends his book with a call for restoring the advances made by the Black Freedom movement, such as affirmative action. Will that be enough? Given the explosion of wealth inequality and the power of resurgent capital, maybe not, but it would be a step in the right direction.