

Introduction

Sociology, Social Commentary, and the Rise of the Right

“So inevitable, yet so completely unforeseen,” said Tocqueville by way of explaining the puzzle that the French Revolution posed for the historical observer. Nothing quite so sweeping can be said about the rise of the Right in America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but it was certainly not something for which American sociologists were prepared. Liberal sociologists in the early 1960s spent considerable time on what they called the “radical Right,” but largely to stress how peripheral it was to the dominant directions of social and political change. Radical sociologists in the late 1960s and into the 1970s simply took the predominance of liberalism in capitalist America for granted and aimed their criticism accordingly. Both these perspectives may provide some tools for understanding the rise of the Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but only if this phenomenon is viewed with fresh eyes.

“The ideological age has ended,” wrote Daniel Bell with finality and hope in the early 1960s. The old ideologies of left and right no longer held sway, at least among intellectuals: the old images of *laissez-faire* in which every government intervention put society on a slippery slope to totalitarianism were as dead as those of socialist utopias achieved through revolution and planning. In their place a rough consensus had emerged on the desirability of the Welfare State, a mixed economy, decentralized power, and political pluralism.

This image of the “end of ideology” of course was not idiosyncratically Bell’s; it reflected the pervasive intellectual mood of the time.¹

To be sure, Bell and his like-minded colleagues recognized the persistence of a right wing in American politics that angrily dissented from the consensus, and they wrote extensively about it. The classic 1955 volume *The New American Right*, which dissected McCarthyism, was updated in 1962 as *The Radical Right* to cover as well the efflorescence of the John Birch society, the Christian Crusade, and the like. The contributors to these volumes were men who made their imprint on a generation of sociologists and other social observers: Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Talcott Parsons, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Richard Hofstadter, among others.²

The image of the Right that emerged from their essays was largely consistent with the broader theme of the “end of ideology.” The radical Right appeared as an episodic disruption of American political life, a futile cry of protest against inexorable social change, a transient emotional response to social dislocation. This assessment was not always made explicitly, but it was always implicit in the way the contributors to *The Radical Right* discussed their subject. Their understanding of why people supported McCarthy or joined the John Birch Society or the Christian Crusade was embodied in their shared notion of status politics. The American emphasis on success and the considerable social fluidity of American society, Hofstadter argued, made Americans especially preoccupied with their status, that is, their relative economic and social standing. Social groups undergoing rapid downward or upward mobility tended to deal with their status anxieties by projecting them onto the political realm in the form of a concern with moral decay or political subversion. Status politics, understood as politics concerned with broad values (as opposed to interest or class politics concerned with material goals) tended to be especially prevalent during times of prosperity. With this argument, the contributors to *The Radical Right* explained, or claimed to explain, why diverse groups—new wealth in the Southwest, upwardly mobile Catholic ethnics, and Protestant fundamentalists in cultural eclipse—flocked at one point or another in the 1950s and early 1960s to the support of the Right.³

Whatever the validity of this argument (to which I return in Chapter 3), it tended to treat the right-wing resurgence as a transitory phenomenon, an episodic eruption rather than a sustained movement.

Status politics appeared as the product of a group's transition from one socioeconomic or cultural rank to another, which by implication could be expected to subside once adjustments to a new status were made. It appeared as a simple cry of pain, without any clear program, and lacked sustained form and direction.

The contributors to *The Radical Right*, moreover, consistently pictured the radical Right as running counter to fundamental, inexorable currents of social change in America. Hofstadter put it simply: "The extreme right suffers from what America has become in the twentieth century." Parsons saw in the Right an individualism of "pristine simplicity" quite out of place in an industrial society with its inherent complex division of labor and large-scale organization. Bell at one point pictured the Right as rebelling against "deep changes taking place in the social structure": the replacement of wealth and property by political position and technical skill as bases of power; the primacy of education over inheritance or entrepreneurship as a route to privilege; the linking of individual achievement, status, and prestige to collectivities; and the emergence of a new elite of professional and technical intellectuals. At another point he simply noted that "what the right wing is fighting, in the shadow of Communism, is essentially 'modernity.'"⁴

This last word, *modernity*, sums up the attitude of a generation of sociologists and social observers to the Right as a political force. Modernity implies something monolithic and inexorable, the inescapable result of overwhelming forces of change. To revolt against modernity is a futile gesture. To regard the Right, therefore, as a "revolt against modernity"—a phrase that recurs often in sociological writing—is to dismiss it as a political force of long-term significance.

The late 1960s witnessed the collapse of the intellectual consensus of which Bell et al. spoke and the resurgence of radical ideas in the social sciences. Sociologists came to disagree among themselves about many things, but not about the marginality of the Right to American politics. The premise of most radical sociology in the ensuing years was that American capitalism flourished within a liberal political shell. Revising the history of liberal reform in the twentieth century, some argued that these reforms, far from signaling the political defeat of the capitalist class, had been decisively shaped by its more enlightened members, representing the larger corporations and banks, especially those that were internationally oriented and tech-

nology-intensive. Faced with economic crisis or social unrest, these leaders headed off more radical social change by instituting reforms that would stabilize the capitalist system—government regulation of the economy, social-welfare legislation, even collective bargaining. From this viewpoint, summarized so ably by G. William Domhoff in *The Higher Circles*, the men who dominated the capitalist class were internationalists abroad and moderate liberals at home; above all, within the constraints of their class interests, they were “rational, reasonable, and forward-looking.”⁵

If capitalists embraced a moderate liberalism, others argued, it was because liberalism and a growing state, far from transforming or threatening capitalism, helped it to function. Especially as corporate monopoly capitalism superseded competitive capitalism, the simple scale of investment and time frame required the state to guarantee long-term markets, underwrite costs of production, and maintain social order and legitimacy. The corporate and state sectors of the economy came to live in something approaching symbiosis. From this vantage point virtually any kind of government spending could be seen as contributing to the essential health of the system. By building highways, ports, and airports, providing gas, electricity, and water, or funding education and research and development, government enhanced productivity, argued James O’Connor in his classic, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*.⁶ Moreover, by providing social insurance of various kinds, sponsoring suburban development and urban renewal, and underwriting child care and hospital facilities, government reduced the costs of reproducing labor. According to O’Connor, welfare spending helped cool out the surplus labor population that capitalism produced, and military spending helped keep the world safe for the economic expansion propelled by surplus capital. To be sure, O’Connor did not see this fit between a growing state (in both liberal and illiberal forms) and capitalism as perfect. Capitalism, he thought, certainly placed limits on liberal reform, and high levels of government spending could certainly precipitate a fiscal crisis of the state as expenditures easily outran revenues. Nonetheless, a hard-line conservative resistance to the growth of the state seemed more and more atavistic in a corporate capitalist world and scarcely drew the attention of a generation of radical sociologists. Terms like *monopoly capitalism* and *advanced capitalism* played the same role in the discourse of radicals as *modernity* played in that of liberals: they made the Right seem irrelevant.

From the vantage point of the end of 1980s, the Right hardly seems atavistic or peripheral. The elements of the radical Right studied by Bell and his colleagues were not episodic eruptions of mindless anger and pain. They were part of the sustained growth of a continuous social movement with a clear, systematic ideology that led ultimately to the New Right and the New Religious Right. Nor was big business so wedded to a corporate liberalism, or American capitalism so tied to a growing state, that conservative leaders and ideas hostile to much of big government could not come to power. More broadly, an advanced industrial society might inevitably encourage both rationalization (the growth of large-scale organization and planning) and secularization (the decline of religious beliefs), but these trends did not prevent the rise to power of an ideology and movement that celebrated a simple individualism and a fervent religiosity.⁷

Its unexpectedness from a sociological perspective makes the rise of the Right in America a compelling issue. It justifies not only an effort to understand why it occurred but also a broader reassessment of the whole phenomenon of conservatism in America. That is what this book is all about.

Of course, my analysis does not emerge from a vacuum. Sociology did not remain frozen in the molds of the 1960s and early 1970s. On the one hand, the sociology of social movements came to view collective action not simply as a reflexlike reaction to social dislocation and discontent but also as a systematic, rational effort to mobilize people and resources toward a political goal. On the other, political sociology quickly recognized that the growth of the domestic state was neither the simple product of a capitalist ruling class nor the simple concomitant of monopoly capitalism. In other words, it gave a greater role to conflict and contradiction. My analysis draws on both these developments and others as well. At the same time, there has hardly been a dearth of commentary, both sociological and otherwise, on the rise of the Right. The present study is both a reflection on much of this work and an effort to carve out a distinct position.

The question of why the Right rose to power is really at least two distinct questions. First, what social conditions created the political opportunities for the Right? Second, how did the Right build and sustain itself as a plausible political alternative capable of seizing those opportunities? This book is concerned with the intersection of these two questions, or more precisely, with using answers to the first to help construct answers to the second.

The story has been told often enough of the multiple crises that beset American society in the late 1960s and the 1970s and rendered the existing political direction—whether called liberalism, political capitalism, or the growth coalition—increasingly troubled. A sputtering economy; a world order less and less amenable to American influence and interests; growing domestic conflict over family, gender roles, and basic values; radical social movements that questioned basic features of American society; and a state the demands on which outran its resources—all these factors contributed to a general crisis of confidence in American institutions and created a political opening for possible alternatives. Given the historical limits of the Left in America, this alternative naturally came from the Right, which presented itself in the late 1970s as a “revitalization movement” (to use Walter Dean Burnham’s term).⁸

Of interest here is how conservatism managed to be in a position to take up the reins for a time. While the sorry state of the economy made it likely that a Republican would win the presidency in 1980, it did not dictate that the victor would be a committed conservative with the organized backing to propose and enact a conservative agenda. How did conservatism come to be a viable alternative in American politics by the late 1970s, and how did it make use of the multiple crises of the time to get into power?

My answer begins from the premise that the rise of the Right should be understood in two analytic and historical parts—how the Right became an effective political contender between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, and how it came to dominate American politics in the late 1970s and the 1980s. The mid-1970s are a likely dividing line because only after that point did the general direction of American politics shift decisively to the right on a wide range of issues and did many of the most important elements of the Right as a coherent political tendency take shape, including the New Right, the New Religious Right, and corporate conservatism.

The Right, or conservatism, began as the hard-line opposition to the New Deal. As a provisional definition (to be fleshed out later), we can say that its central political assumption has been that the main problem facing America, and indeed all of humanity, is collectivism, the tendency for the state to organize and control all social life. As Chapter 1 argues, the 1950s were a pivotal time for this conservatism: New Deal liberalism had receded but had left an indelible mark on

American politics. Tide after tide of political reaction had crested and fallen back without washing out this mark, and conservatives, it became clear, could no longer rely on the natural rhythms of American politics to put them back into serious political contention. The dominant political consensus, sometimes called cold-war liberalism, assumed that America should play a leadership role in the international effort to contain communism and that government at home should play a positive role in promoting economic growth and maintaining the health of capitalism. Conservatives, of course, were also anticommunist and procapitalist, but in quite different ways from liberals, and that is where their problem lay. Their anticommunism was isolationist, not internationalist, and the capitalism they sought to defend was of the *laissez-faire*, pristine variety.

To become a political contender again, conservatives had to reconstruct their ideology and build a sustained, independent movement. Chapter 2 examines how conservatives transformed their case against collectivism, foreign and domestic, by on the one side jettisoning their isolationism and crafting a different kind of internationalism and on the other side developing a defense of *laissez-faire* capitalism that did not rely on the themes of growth and prosperity that cold-war liberalism had so convincingly appropriated. These ideological projects formed the basis for the often far-ranging intellectual self-scrutiny among conservatives in the 1950s and early 1960s and led to the creation of what we recognize today as conservatism. I approach this reconstruction process with an eye not only to how the finished product emerged—a matter covered in considerable detail by George Nash in *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*—but also to what got left out and why conservatives went to so much trouble to begin with.⁹

Chapter 3 traces the growth of the network of conservative organizations and activists from the late 1950s through the late 1970s, ending with an examination of the continuities between the Old Right and the New Right. I take issue both with those, like the contributors to *The Radical Right*, who saw in the development of the movement only irrational eruptions of status anxiety and with those official movement historians, like William Rusher in *The Rise of the Right*, who view it as pure insurgency or rebellion, albeit of a more rational kind. Instead, I argue that the secret to the growth of the conservative movement lay in a paradoxical combination of respect-

ability and rebelliousness. The conservative movement combined solid socioeconomic and political roots and the access to resources these provided with a broadly antiestablishment ideology that allowed it to appeal to the growing range of discontents bequeathed by the 1960s. The cadre of political activists known as the New Right was simply the culmination of this movement, not a right-wing populist break with conservatism as some (Alan Crawford in *Thunder on the Right*, Kevin Phillips in *Post-Conservative America*) have argued.¹⁰

If conservatism had become a serious political contender by the early 1970s, however, it failed to have a decisive impact until the end of the decade. The march of the Right to power in the late 1970s and early 1980s fed upon three developments, the rise of the New Religious Right, the mobilization of corporate conservatism, and the revitalization of the Republican party. Each of these involved not so much the emergence of something new as the strengthening of a relationship that had already been central to the life of conservatism—to religious traditionalism, to big business, and to the GOP. In addition, each of these developments captures one important way that social commentators have characterized the rise of the Right—as a successful social movement, as a realignment of elites, and as a transformation of the electorate. Finally, each provides a lens through which to view some of the broader changes in American society that shaped the fortunes of the Right.

The religiously based conservative political organizations and activists known as the New Religious Right, Chapter 4 argues, emerged from the interaction of the so-called social issues and the growth of the evangelical-fundamentalist religious world. For a considerable time, beginning in the late 1960s, it was common to argue that a range of issues having to do with morality, social order, family and gender roles, and the like would be the new cutting edge of American politics, creating new political cleavages and alignments. (Kevin Phillips made the argument in various forms in a series of books starting with *The Emerging Republican Majority*; Everett Carll Ladd, Jr., and Charles D. Hadley did so in *Transformations of the American Party System*; and Ronald Inglehart generalized the argument to Western societies in *The Silent Revolution*.)¹¹ It is clear from the vantage point of the late 1980s that they have had no such revolutionary effect. Issues like abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment have played the more modest role, however, of mobilizing new cohorts of conservative ac-

tivists, often from traditional religious backgrounds. This has been especially so among evangelical Christians, where discontent about a permissive secular culture and a growing network of religious and cultural organizations together provided fertile conditions for political mobilization, conditions carefully cultivated by the leaders of the conservative movement. The rise of the New Religious Right, in short, fed on several of the conditions that theories of social movements generally emphasize—heightened discontent, a growing capacity for collective action, and the intensified efforts of social-movement professionals.

The mobilization of big business around a conservative agenda lay at the heart of a developing set of linkages between conservative and neoconservative intellectuals, corporate money, and political power—what Sidney Blumenthal has termed the “rise of the Counter-Establishment” or a “realignment of elites.” These linkages made it easier for conservative ideas and policymakers to have political impact. Although much has been said about corporate conservatism (in Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers’s *Right Turn* and Thomas Edsall’s *The New Politics of Inequality*, for example), much about it remains puzzling.¹² Chapter 5 examines the impact of corporate conservatism on business lobbying, election funding, and support for policy-planning organizations and shows not only that big business did indeed mobilize but also that corporate conservatism was *hegemonic* in character; that is, it drew broad-based corporate support and involved an effort to influence politics in the interest not of specific firms or industries but of capitalists generally. I examine the problems this corporate conservatism poses for most theories about the political role of big business. If capitalists are a ruling class, as many have argued, why did they have to mobilize and why did they rebel against their state? If they are not a ruling class and indeed lack the ability to pursue their class interests, how did they suddenly gain the capacity to act in such a coherent, broad-based fashion? Chapter 5 confronts various theories of the state with the phenomenon of corporate conservatism and concludes in effect that the nature of capitalist power, whether ruling-class or not, varies with historical circumstances.

The partial revitalization of the Republican party after several decades of distinctly minority status and the debacle of Watergate has invariably been viewed through the prism of realignment: was there

a fundamental shift in the political allegiances of the American electorate akin to what occurred in the 1930s or at previous nodal points in American history? Although Chapter 6 examines the likely answers to this question, its central thesis is that the question itself is misleading. A general realignment, however defined, probably did not occur, but the Republican party nonetheless gained, and the electorate changed in significant ways that the preoccupation with realignment obscures. Among some groups, notably white southerners and evangelicals, something akin to realignment did occur. Among other voters, a growing tendency to make race-by-race decisions about specific candidates rather than rely on deeper party loyalties probably helped Republicans, whose superior centralized control of money allowed them to target undecided voters in close races and make effective use of new political technologies. Finally, the general tendency of the electorate to cast their votes on the basis of general economic conditions also aided the Republicans as more and more voters came to see the GOP, rather than the Democrats, as the "party of prosperity." In short, selective realignment, dealignment, and economic voting each gave small advantages to the Republican party in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The rise of the New Religious Right, the mobilization of corporate conservatism, and the reinvigoration of the Republican party together embody or reflect many of the important social and political changes that turned conservatism from political contender to political victor. But they do not constitute one grand, integrated explanation for the rise of the Right, for that rise did not result from one massive wave of social change but from a number of smaller ones.

The six chapters that follow provide a composite portrait of American conservatism as a social phenomenon, pulling together studies of public opinion and ideological texts, theories of the state in advanced capitalism and theories of postindustrial society, images of the Right as insurgent political outsider and as well-connected insider. The result is an assessment of the emergence of the New Right and its sources of strength.