
EDITORIAL

With each passing week the evidence mounts that the 1980 election was a crucial moment in a counterrevolution that has been gathering for more than a decade. There is no secret about its targets. The counterrevolution is aimed at liberalism and its works. But that does not convey the radical nature of the change occurring in the deep structure of American political life.

Liberalism has been a continuous and powerful force in the American political tradition since the Revolution. Most of the categories by which Americans have interpreted their political history are liberal. Twentieth-century America is primarily a creature of the liberal administrations of Wilson, FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. The country's political culture has been shaped by liberal notions of freedom, toleration, pluralism, equality, justice, and power. Liberalism has also been primarily responsible for setting the legislative agenda for the past several decades. The agenda included assorted social-welfare benefits; improvements in wages and working conditions; the encouragement of organized labor; vast agricultural subsidies as well as programs aimed at improving the quality of rural life and culture; a huge system of federal financial support for all levels of education and for both private and public institutions; the beginnings of a national health program; a system of consumer protection and education; and a program to safeguard citizens and their environments from the poisonous effects of industrial processes and products.

The repudiation of liberalism makes the election more than a normal event in the life of a two-party system. Institutions, policies, and expectations, many of which had been implanted for almost a half-century, have been marked for eradication or drastic pruning. "I don't think people are entitled to any service," declared Reagan's chief budget officer, and added, "I don't believe that there is

any basic right to legal services. . . .” Perhaps the strongest evidence for the counterrevolutionary character of the forces that have come together around Reagan is the virtual nonexistence of any organized resistance by the Democrats in Congress. It was only yesterday that politicians and commentators were bemoaning the built-in features of our constitutional system that made leadership impossible and prevented any program from being pushed through Congress without first having to pay tribute to every congressional chieftain. The total collapse of the Democrats before a budget that defecates on every Democratic program of the last fifty years and the obscene haste with which many Democrats have tried, like mindless Stakhanovites, to outdo the Reaganites by raising defense appropriations while lowering social services and food-stamp programs have contributed to the impression of a political miracle: suddenly the system works smoothly and rationally, which says something about what social forces and programs the constitutional arrangements are disposed to serve and what ones not.

With all signs pointing toward relatively easy passage of the Reagan program, commentators have been comparing these early months of the Reagan administration with the “100 Days” of FDR’s first term when many basic New Deal programs were enacted. There are, however, some revealing differences that bring out the serious and counterrevolutionary quality of Reaganism. For one thing, the New Deal had a list of programs but no coherent ideology; Reaganism has both. For another, the New Deal created rather than destroyed institutions and expectations; it took away some power from industrialists, but not much, and very little, if any, from the banks. The Reagan program aims at demolishing vast structures of benefits and protections which, until recently, constituted the only system of power in the hands of the poorer classes. Finally, while the New Deal made some progress in providing a measure of social and economic security to the many, Reaganism is, quite simply, a counterrevolution in favor of sharper inequalities among classes and races.

In another vital respect comparisons with the New Deal are somewhat misleading because, necessarily, they concern mainly economic programs and these can be quickly reversed or modified if need be. The last Keynesian, we should remember, was Richard Nixon. What is more importantly at stake are political and individual liberties. Historically liberals have borne the main burden of promoting and defending individual freedom, the rights of minorities and dissenters, academic freedom, cultural pluralism and experimentalism, the rights of women, and sexual freedom. The forces ranged behind Reaganism have understood freedom primarily in terms of property rights and the absence of regulation. The administration and its supporters have served notice of their intention to reverse the gains in some areas (abortion, freedom of information), allow others to erode by malign neglect (legal services, voting rights), and to encourage

positively those government agencies that systematically spy upon and harass citizens, especially citizens who express radical opinions and join radical groups. As for the attitude of Reaganites toward the value of democratic participation, Reagan's top aide, Edwin Meese, gave a glimpse of the new civic ideal at a press conference. When asked if, in view of impending changes in the direction of foreign policy, the people would be encouraged to participate in the discussion, he replied, "Yes, every four years."

What are the elements that make up the new ideology of counterrevolution? Before trying to answer that we should note that there is every reason to believe that the administration will continue the policies of previous administrations and invest huge sums to promote new technology. This means that the new order promises to be a combination of dazzling technological progress (space shuttles, computer chips, lasers, and genetic engineering) *and* political and cultural reaction. A particular set of ideological ingredients is needed to support this kind of order because, unlike most previous power structures in history, the emerging structure is composed of elements which are *inherently* unable to generate moral and political values, much less the kind of passionate convictions that political orders seem to depend upon. The main elements of the power structure are: corporate capitalism, managerial bureaucracy, and science-technology. Each element, in its own way, prides itself on being "objective," value-neutral. None has broad appeal; none needs popular approval; and each is authoritarian. This system of power needs an ideology that can compensate for the political and moral deficiencies of a technocratic, secular, and elitist outlook.

What are the elements that have been collected in the counterrevolution to give it moral and political fervor?

First, there is an aggressive patriotism whose stridency seems in inverse proportion to the widespread realization that Americans lack an instinctive sense of shared beliefs, memories, culture, and a common fate. We can mobilize patriotic demonstrations but we lack a sense of common nationality. Racial, religious, cultural, and linguistic differences seem to block any instinctive feeling that we are all members of the same collectivity. Unlike nationality, patriotism is neither political nor cultural. It is a rawer, simpler sentiment. The patriot admires power and seeks to identify with it because secretly he feels powerless. Above all, patriotism feeds on resentments: at having been defeated by a nickel-and-dime country of small Orientals; at having its wars fought by a military force with a disproportionate number of blacks; and, more recently, at being held up to ridicule and for ransom by a mob of political extremists and religious fanatics.

Then there are the fundamentalist and evangelical groups which have taken a more pronounced political turn in recent years. The Moral Majority may share no ontological assumptions with scientists and technocrats, but they do admire the same virtues of discipline and hard work, and feel no shame at possessing

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power or profits when these result. Further, the puritannical qualities of the Moral Majority make them the perfect complement to the anti-welfare thrust of the new political economy. The patriots and the religious crusaders have found their common motto in the Oklahoma bumper sticker that reads "God, Guns, and Guts."

If we wonder how it is possible for the Creationists to join with the Darwinians, the revelationists to ally with technocrats, and the fundamentalists with the multinationalists, the answer is precisely in the irrelevancy of the former to the latter. In this new order science, bureaucracy, and corporations are not to be constituted or defined by religion, only supported by it. No one has yet claimed that the well-advertised prayer meetings in corporate board rooms are going to transform TRW into a Christian corporation.

One of the most interesting, if not important, contributions to the ideology of reaction is that of the intellectual, especially the academic intellectual. From roughly 1932-72 it is probably accurate to say that most academics were New Deal sympathizers, and that insofar as there were mandarins to defend and define liberal culture they were in the academy. Today all of that is changed. One symbol is Professor Jeane Kirkpatrick, our U.N. representative, who combines a Hubert Humphrey-liberal background with a fondness for defending regimes which torture as a matter of principle. The other symbol is collective: it is all those independently minded defenders of academic integrity who once warned that the professoriat was being corrupted by its "student nigger-lovers" and that the gravest threat to American politics lay in ideological extremism, but who now float comfortably in think-tanks subsidized by corporate wealth and stir themselves on occasion to sign right-wing manifestoes against "international terrorism" and in favor of the murderous regime of El Salvador.

The counterrevolution in the making is of formidable proportions. With the collapse of the Democratic Party and the desperate efforts of its leaders to join the rush to reaction, some things seem apparent. The ease with which the Reagan administration is rolling back fifty years of liberal progress—which represented social programs that were modest, even by the standards of European socialism—suggests that genuine democrats have little to gain from continuing to press for change through the conventional national institutions of political parties, elections, Congress, and the presidency. Corporate power and resources have totally won that game; the only matter in doubt is which corporate alliances will gain the most. The counterrevolution has helped to crystallize the choice: for in destroying liberal culture, corrupting its political institutions, and attacking liberal freedoms the counterrevolution has inadvertently exposed and sharpened the alternative. Historically, liberalism is the compromise version of democracy, willing to trade popular participation for representation, to modify equality to allow for meritocratic elites, and to suffer the delusion that the mor-

ality of public choices could be mostly avoided by relying on a system of incentives. The counterrevolution has, in effect, narrowed the choice: democracy or the corporate state.

The democratic prospect may seem bleak, but despair is a luxury that democrats cannot afford. Since the present political system is likely to remain an enemy of freedom, equality, and participation, and since its repressive powers are formidable, democratic resistance should be expressed in constructive actions aimed at creating alternative modes of common life. Most individuals possess the basic resources needed to found new, more democratic relationships: some skills, energy, and the moral sense to participate in the exercise of power. Contrary to the cheerless advice of disillusioned radicals of the '60s that the right course was to prepare for "the long march through institutions," today's democrats must begin to disengage from the many forms of dependency that make them accomplices in the legitimation of reactionary power.

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