

ABSTRACT

GILLAN, ZACHARY JAMES. "Bodies Upon the Gears:" Late Capitalism and Middle-Class Radicalism in the United States, 1960-1980. (Under the direction of Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron).

This thesis is an examination of the political economy of radical American movements originating in the middle class in the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that the hegemony of late capitalism necessitated that oppositional movements in this period revolved around the agency of the free market individual. It does so through the investigation of three case studies—the student New Left, the black capitalist followers of Floyd McKissick, and the feminist movement that used the magazine *Ms.* as a discursive site—which all worked toward a radical utopian shift in the society of the United States, even while rooted in the middle class. Between the market's colonization of everyday life, the rise of the New Right, and their own desires to appeal to the middle class, the architects of these movements had to walk a middle path between the dialectical ideals of communitarianism and individualism.

Moving in a roughly chronological order, this thesis proceeds through specific examinations of each of the movements in question. It begins with the New Left of the 1960s, focusing on Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), arguing for the importance of the mass consumer culture in the activism of these students. It then moves to an investigation of the black capitalist Soul City project of Floyd McKissick, a former Black Power ideologue turned Republican. Lastly, it examines the shift of the second-wave feminist thought surrounding the magazine *Ms.* from an anti-capitalist radical feminism to a more pragmatic liberal feminism designed to fit the lives of the suburban middle-class. Throughout, this thesis examines both the hegemonic power of the marketplace, and the capabilities inherent in its co-optation by radical utopian movements.

“Bodies Upon the Gears:” Late Capitalism and Middle-Class Radicalism in the United States, 1960-1980

by
Zachary James Gillan

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APPROVED BY:

David Gilmartin

Jason Bivins

Katherine Mellen Charron
Chair of Advisory Committee

DEDICATION

For my parents, Jim and Mary Gillan, who set me on the path that led me here.

BIOGRAPHY

A native of North Carolina, Zachary Gillan received his B.A. in History from North Carolina State University in 2005.

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INTRODUCTION

The eruption of the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley stands as an iconic image of the American 1960s, a nostalgic evocation of the mass upheaval and protests of the era. On December 2, 1964, students enraged by the university's refusal to allow civil rights agitation climbed atop an incapacitated police cruiser and converted it into a makeshift soapbox. From this symbolic position, Mario Savio put voice to the feelings of young people throughout the nation, proclaiming that this was "a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop."¹ A passionate call to action, this plea provides a representative image of the Sixties, with Savio's terrific and terrifying imagery of bodies enmeshed within the gears of the great apparatus giving rise to two conflicting interpretations of the period. As Savio meant it, this speech summons forth a noble encapsulation of the activism of the decade: impassioned protestors, jamming the system with no regard for their own lives or safety, forcing the inhumane machine to change or be destroyed. In hindsight, however, the speech also illuminates a more tragic narrative: these same protestors, this same passion, but with the gears grinding blindly on, carrying their bodies through the apparatus with little to no regard for their rhetoric and activism.

Following a middle path between these conflicting interpretations speaks to the hegemonic conflict between oppositional movements and the dominant structure—which,

¹ Mario Savio, "Berkeley Fall," in *The Radical Reader*, ed. Timothy McCarthy and John McMillian (NY: The New Press, 2003), 483.

following in the ‘60s insistence on “naming the system,” we can identify as “late capitalism.” Radical social movements of the period, indeed, had to confront the ever-more expansive marketplace of late capitalism in unprecedented ways, and oftentimes their efficacy depended on their ability to harness commodity consumption to sell their own brands of utopian change. The hegemony of late capitalism is such that even radical social movements in America tend to revolve around the agency of the free market individual, bearing out Raymond Williams’ insight that “the dominant culture... at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture.”² In the postmodern mélange of late capitalism, however, the converse effect, of counter-culture on the dominant culture, is increasingly important. Not quite Savio’s vision of protesters bringing the great machine to its knees—but not quite the converse, either.

The end of the Second World War saw the fruition of the advanced consumer culture formerly latent in capitalism, when a nation that had been crippled by the Great Depression entered a period of growth and abundance beyond the wildest dreams of even the most fanatical of free-market ideologues.³ The interventionist state remnant from the New Deal explicitly encouraged this expansion, which also depended on advances in productive and communicative technologies. At the same time, the Baby Boom of the post-war years combined with the mass consumer culture to create a similarly novel surge in suburban

² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

³ A vast amount of literature exists concerning the growth of consumerism prior to World War II. See, for example, Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (USA: BasicBooks, 1994); and Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

living. Together, these tendencies reflected what I am referring to as late capitalism.⁴ As differentiated from earlier forms of capitalism—mercantile, monopoly, industrial—late capitalism focuses on the move of commodification outside of the means of production and explicit market interactions to colonize all other aspects of day-to-day life and even the consciousness of individual consumers—what Adorno called the “totality” of the market.⁵ In this manner, the politicization of the production process spread to the cultural realm, in terms of both production and consumption. The growth of mass production, in other words, had forced capitalism “to produce desire and so titillate individual sensibilities” in order to continually reinforce desire for consumer commodities. Both multinational monopoly capital and interventionist states encouraged this expansion of markets and production.⁶ This emphasis on the expansion of capitalism should show, hopefully, that “late” in this context is meant not necessarily to entail the immanence of a socialist paradise, but more a continuous evolution of the system—a structural shift, but not a break. As in earlier iterations, late capitalism continues to rely on private ownership, the commodification of labor, and the situation of systematic control in bourgeois hands.⁷ As Marx and Engels wrote in 1848, capitalism was a revolutionary system that entailed the “[c]onstant revolutionizing of production” and “uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations,” to the degree that “[a]ll

⁴ Similar terms used to describe this phase have included postindustrial capitalism, commodity or consumer capitalism, the society of the spectacle, one-dimensional society, and so forth.

⁵ Theodor Adorno, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?,” in *Modern German Sociology*, ed. Volker Meja, Dieter Misgeld and Nico Stehr (NY: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990): 63; F. Bechhofer and B. Elliott, “The Petite Bourgeoisie in Late Capitalism,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 11 (1985), 204.

⁷ Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 66.

that is solid melts into air [and] all that is holy is profaned.”⁸ Late capitalism represented more of the same, augmented by its reliance on the growth of corporate power and the massive expansion of the marketplace, expressed perhaps most clearly by the escalation of advertising. These commodified media forms inundated the cultural landscape, typifying the mass scale, planned obsolescence, and emphasis on simulacra of late capitalism.⁹

The critical theorist Fredric Jameson argued in 1979 that cultural texts in late capitalism, of either high or mass culture, rely at base on “our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived.” Critics of the modern era, surrounded by the drive toward commodification and privatization, must seek to “reawaken… some sense of the ineradicable drive towards collectivity that can be detected… in the most degraded works of mass culture.” Jameson insists, then, that scholars must examine both a text’s “Utopian dimension, that is, its ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order,” and its ideological or pragmatic side—the reification of the title. In this manner, cultural signifiers not only utilize “ideological manipulation,” but also must reference realistic historical or social narratives which provide the utopian means of influence.¹⁰ Jameson’s usage, here, relies on the traditional Marxist definition of “ideology” as a tool used by the ruling class to legitimate their hegemonic place

⁸ Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972), 337.

⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*, No. 1 (Winter 1979), 142, 144, and 147.

within the social structure.¹¹ In short, “works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated.”¹² This seems as true of social movements as it is of cultural texts in late capitalism—or, at the least, of the discursive spectacles that social movements create. As David Harvey has observed, the spectacle “has always been a potent political weapon” in the hands of both the state and oppositional movements.¹³ In the image-obsessed cultural marketplace of late capitalism, this potency has only increased.

Examining the efforts of three different American social movements in the decades following World War II illuminates this process at work. The student New Left of the 1960s, the black capitalist followers of Floyd McKissick, and the second wave feminist culture that utilized the magazine *Ms.* as a discursive site all attempted to bring about a utopian shift in the social fabric of the United States. They pursued these radical ends, furthermore, while firmly rooted in the middle class. In so doing, the rhetoric of all three of these movements had to contend with postwar society’s centrist emphasis on consensus, closely related to the co-optive powers of late capitalist hegemony. Indeed, the spectacles and narrative images created by these movements had to compete in the marketplace of ideas, and to that end, they attempted to harness both communitarian and individualist ideals to their respective causes.

¹¹ Shane Gunster, “Rethinking the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 45 (Spring, 2000), 44.

¹² Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” 144.

¹³ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 88.

What we can thus discern is the political economy of middle-class American radicalism in the era of late capitalism.

The relationship between the American middle class and late capitalism remains an inextricably close one. Where Marx and Engels had predicted that the progress of capitalism would leave the middle class an atavistic holdover, in fact their position in the United States has only strengthened from the earliest years of the twentieth century. This class predated the rise of late capitalism, and helped to set the scene for its fruition. As historian Paul Buhle puts it, intellectuals had “become an ethnic group,” or begun to recognize their class commonalities, in the 1920s.¹⁴ This era, after all, initialized the explosion of mass production, increasingly aided by the commodification of time known as “Taylorism,” overseen by the managerial leadership of the middle class. Barbara Ehrenreich has used the term “middle class” to stand in for the more unwieldy “professional-managerial class,” those whose “economic and social status is based on education,” unlike the labor of the working class or the capital of the upper stratum.¹⁵ This contrasts with those who would define away the middle class as simply wealthier members of the working class, due to their lack of capital, which seems an unworkable definition, including as it would the vast majority of the population. As a class, then, this group existed within the cultural turn of late capitalism to work toward “the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations;” in other words to administer the rule of the capitalists over the proletariat.¹⁶ From the beginning of the

¹⁴ Paul Buhle, *Marxism in America* (NY: Verso, 1991), 160.

¹⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (USA: HarperPerennial, 1990), 12.

¹⁶ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” *Radical America*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (March-April, 1977), 13.

century, then, the middle class had participated in the shift from mercantile capitalism through the statist phase and on to late capitalism, and in the ever-evolving consumer culture. These shifts had revolved increasingly around the expansion of commodification, the restructuring of production and politics, and the concentration of social control in the government and massive corporations.¹⁷ By the early 1960s, this class's role in the production and promulgation of ideology, therefore, provided an ideal situation for the inclusion of a Jamesonian-style rhetoric of utopian radicalism, to "utilize the subversive possibilities that already existed in popular political culture."¹⁸

Radical or progressive social movements, working within this context, had to confront the issue of consumerism in unprecedented ways. The complacency of much of America within late capitalism, in fact, necessitated that these groups harness the marketplace in ways that their predecessors would never have dreamed—to co-opt or to be co-opted, as it were. Some were more candid about this relationship than others. Floyd McKissick's Soul City project, for example, presented a radically utopian construction sold via the rhetoric of conservative free market individualism. *Ms.*, in its initial years of production, existed in tension between ideals of mass radicalism—organized along gender lines—and individual consumption. In relying on both of these tendencies, the magazine provided a similar attempt to harness the marketplace to empower the marginalized as radical individuals, although in a more conflicted manner than McKissick. The student activists of the 1960s New Left occupied a much more contentious space within the vast marketplace of

¹⁷ See Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," 15-17.

¹⁸ Stanley Aronowitz, "When the New Left was New," in *The 60s Without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 21.

late capitalism, often violently rejecting the liberal capitalist structure in their rhetoric. At the same time, however, they relied more on the agency of the individual—and the choices thereof—than on a form of communitarian class consciousness. For these movements, consumption came to play a more important role than production in the growth and expansion of radicalization, reflecting their increasingly balanced emphases on the utopian impulses of both individualism and communitarianism

Nor did capitalism, in turn, ignore or discount these movements. Where the reaction of the captains of industry in previous eras had been one of violence and repression, co-optation rules the day during late capitalism—aided by the ideological machine of the middle class. The advertising industry, presented as the face of late capitalism, aggressively co-opted and commodified the oppositional movements of the 1960s, most particularly the student counterculture. At times, “authentic” former Leftists even participated in this process. As Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out, this is a common characteristic of oppositional groups working within a capitalist system.¹⁹ Particularly within late capitalism, then, rampant commodification and the individualized approach of radical social movements increased the danger of this sort of co-optation. Within this context, it became frightfully easy for cultural rebellion and political protest to become intermingled—or perhaps even interchangeable. Indeed, the 60s aphorism that “the personal is political” uncomfortably reflects this relationship. As activists Roderick Aya and Norman Miller noted in a retrospective look at the movement in 1971, “[c]ultural revolution in America... is merely consumerism when

¹⁹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (NY: Verso, 1992), 68.

separated from a concrete political movement.”²⁰ Yet historian Kathleen Donohue has also pointed out that this relationship is hardly one endemic to radicals alone. In her estimation, it has only been in the twentieth century that consumption has become a right protected by the liberal state, a political matter much as production had long been.²¹ Within late capitalism, even the state itself has been unable to resist the commodifying reach of the consumer culture.

Thomas Frank, in his investigation of the ‘60s counterculture and the advertising agency, suggested that not enough scholarly attention has been paid to the phenomenon of co-optation, something in his view that “we vilify almost automatically.” Frank emphatically rejected the standard view of the revolutionary and authentic counterculture mimicked and cheapened by business co-optation. Instead, he argues that late capitalism “was as dynamic a force in its own way” as the counterculture, “undertaking dramatic transformations of both the way it operated and the way it imagined itself.”²² Though not entirely rejecting his insistence that commodification did not cheapen oppositional movements, accepting his thesis and taking it a step further entails reversing the relationship and examining what we could call “inverted co-optation,” the adoption of capitalist business tactics by radical social movements.

All of these tendencies have relied heavily on the tenet of individualism. This, however, has long been a part of the American character, traceable back to the Jeffersonian

²⁰ Roderick Aya and Norman Miller, *The New American Revolution* (USA: The Free Press, 1971), 11.

²¹ Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom From Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

²² Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6-8.

emphasis on small landholders and the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "all men are created equal," historically perhaps the greatest barrier to class consciousness and socialism in the United States. Indeed, in the early years of the twentieth century, Herbert Hoover pointed to "rugged individualism" as the American alternative to socialism, while Franklin Delano Roosevelt called the socialization of capitalism under his administration a form of "community rugged individualism."²³ W.E.B. DuBois, identifying this mindset as the "American Assumption" in 1935, described it as the idea that, with hard work and individual fortitude, any individual could succeed in the marketplace, and so buy their way up the social ladder to the bourgeoisie.²⁴ In the modern era, this has become known more ideally as the American Dream. In anthropologist Elizabeth G. Traube's presentation, this "success ideology," which appealed above all to the middle class, was rooted in the American frontier myth, and reverberated uncomfortably with the growing incorporation of American life in the 1900s. Indeed, in her formulation, this tension allows both proponents and critics of "the new corporate society" to rely on "frontier individualism."²⁵ What these descriptions of individualism fail to mention is that this capitalist atomization necessarily entails competition. This makes its presentation as an alternative to socialism particularly insidious—an increasingly important tactic of the twentieth century American Right—precluding, as it does, the growth of group consciousness in the face of power inequality.

²³ Herbert Hoover, "Campaign Speech, New York City, October 22, 1928," in *Campaign Speeches of American Presidential Candidates 1928-1972*, ed. Aaron Singer (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1976), 23. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Remarks at Tupelo, Miss.," in The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=14782> (accessed 10 February 2009).

²⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 182-183.

²⁵ Elizabeth G. Traube, "Secrets of Success in Postmodern Society," in *Culture/Power/History*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 560-561.

The radical middle-class movements of the 1960s and 1970s, then, help to illustrate the intersections between gender, race, and class in the United States in addition to the tension between individualism and communitarianism. All of them were explicitly concerned with both drawing attention to and rectifying inequities in the power structure, although they faced varying degrees of success. SDS is most obviously linked with the issues of class in the United States, but the New Left's expansive aims provide additional space to examine the interconnectivity of race, class, and gender in the United States. Floyd McKissick's effort to wed Black Power and capitalism in the Soul City project involved an overt association of race and class, linking racial pride with the values of the white middle class of the Republican Party. Ironically, McKissick's timing coincided with the GOP's embrace of southern white supremacists disaffected with the Democratic Party. Lastly, *Ms.* engaged the gender dynamics of mass culture, perhaps the most personal issue of power dynamics for white Americans in the middle and upper classes. Power inequities drove all of these into expressions of radical discontent—although, for the New Left in particular, this drive was tempered with self-interest in a more authentic middle-class lifestyle.

Acknowledging that radicalism represents a difficult concept to pin down with any specificity, Raymond Williams, in tracing the general history of the word, has written that the modern usage avoided certain “dogmatic or factional associations while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change,” as distinct from the armed uprisings associated with the word “revolutionary.”²⁶ Historian Daniel Pope, in attempting to define the concept in

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1983), 252.

the context of the United States, pointed to “*equality* as a central objective and core value” of American radicalism, qualified by the use of “illegitimate means” to work toward that goal. Even he concedes, however, that his remains a partial definition at best. Where does the use of state power on behalf of equality fall, particularly given the radical commitment to freedom? What about groups that “affirm difference as much as or more than they claim equality”—hallmarks of both radical feminism and Black Power? Granting the aversion toward “the submergence of individual or group identity” in the search for equality, Pope goes on to make a number of other specifications. Equality as the core goal, he insists, excludes movements “which exalted order and discipline, claimed the superiority of one group or people to another, or strove for individual choice and opportunity (often through unregulated market capitalism) as their main objective.”²⁷ While few would question the radicalism of the New Left, Floyd McKissick’s love of market capitalism and *Ms.*’s insistence on individual choice sit very uncomfortably within this definition. The catch, though, is that both utilized more mainstream tactics in pursuit of their core goal: *equality*.

Pope’s definition, moreover, fails to engage these movements’ utopianism—another hard-to-define term, and yet an integral characteristic for those struggling to remake the world of late capitalism. As historian Russell Jacoby has defined utopianism as “a belief that the future could fundamentally surpass the present,” wherein the “texture of life, work and even love might little resemble that now familiar to us,” and where “history contains possibilities of freedom and pleasure hardly tapped.”²⁸ Jacoby’s argument, it bears noting, is

²⁷ Daniel Pope, *American Radicalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 3.

²⁸ Russell Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (USA: Basic Books, 1999), xi.

that this outlook, in terms of politics at the least, has withered in the modern era—is “stone dead.” Following Jameson’s formulation, I would suggest, in contrast, that it was simply diluted, or tempered, with the inclusion of a pragmatic individualism borrowed from both capitalism and American tradition. Perhaps late capitalism did not have to be overturned in order to make some sort of utopian progress—perhaps, in fact, the commodification of ideas could be used to sell radicalism. The historical and cultural contingencies of late capitalism, in concert with the increasing commodification of day-to-day life, constrained Leftists to operate within the marketplace of ideas. This was the era, after all, in which the popular wisdom held that all ideologies, those associated with utopia perhaps most of all, were dead, discredited in the face of the continuing liberal-capitalist state—an ideology itself, some would insist, but not one, ironically enough, to its ideologues.

Inside this political landscape, moreover, these movements had to contend with the rise of the New Right, who used the rhetoric of community and tradition in order to promote the free market and sell their brand of reactionary politics. While the New Left has long occupied the center of attention given to the oppositional politics of the 1960s, their conservative counterparts have longer occupied the seat of power. Initially informed by the grassroots 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater, the New Right borrowed from the Old an insistence on individualized conceptions of local or states’ rights and an unobtrusive federal government. They jettisoned the preference for an isolationist state, impossible in the context of the Cold War, and added a fanatical love of the free market. At

the same time, however, the Right found itself as constrained by late capitalism as did their opponents on the Left—epitomized by their rhetorical emphasis on their side as “pro-life” rather than “anti-choice” in the debate over abortion rights. As proponents of the free market, the Right could not compromise its devotion to individual decision in such a manner. In the shadow of the New Deal and the Great Society, this movement combined a libertarian political stance with a moral insistence on traditional family values.²⁹

In fact, this ascendant conservatism drove some of the members of the radical movements under consideration to embrace a focus on reform within the system rather than revolution. After all, they faced a backlash on the Right that was consolidating power day by day. At the same time, even as radical movements felt marginalized by the consensus mindset of the liberal society, conservatives felt that “until the New Deal, conservative ideas had occupied a central, if not dominant, place in American culture and national life.” Thus, they viewed their current predicament as “a trying time of displacement, marginalization, and struggle.” Indeed, historian Lisa McGirr suggests that it was precisely this outsider status that enabled the partisans of the New Right “to build a self-conscious movement to develop a critique of liberal elites,” who had “first marginalized, then reshuffled, and eventually reinvigorated American conservatism.”³⁰ The dialectical relationship between the evolution of the Left and Right, building on a shared oppositional mindset that they shared, cannot be ignored. To wit, historian Kevin Mattson has suggested that the conservative movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries inherited the utopianism and “spirit of

²⁹ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (USA: Princeton University Press, 2001), 149.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

rebellion” of the New Left.³¹ Movements on both sides of the spectrum, indeed, had to balance countervailing tendencies toward personalized individualism and a more idealistic communitarianism in order to operate within late capitalism.

The similarities between the far Left and the far Right have been pointed out many times. Within the world-structure of late capitalism, though, it seems that the similarities have crept toward the center. Indeed, the emphasis on the free market individual became a common factor on both sides, as the capitalist emphasis on expansion reached a crescendo under late capitalism. It has been suggested that one of the hallmarks of this era is the expansion of the market dynamic into spheres of life it had formerly failed to reach, including the unconscious, the third world, and, I would suggest, oppositional social movements—on both Left and Right.³² Historian Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has suggested that in the post-war years, the Right’s focus on community and family acted as a co-optation or pre-emption of the Left’s traditional insistence on class and communitarian issues.³³ The Right tended to rhetorically counteract the effects of Leftist movements, often painting them as alien threats that opposed fundamental American values, thereby feeding a hysterical threat about the imminent takeover by these “others.” This thread ran throughout the Right, Old and New, in the latter half of the twentieth century. It encompassed communists and student radicals, the African American Civil Rights Movement, and the second wave of feminism, all of which provided, at various times, spectacular scapegoats for their opponents on the Right.

³¹ Kevin Mattson, *Rebels All: A Short History of the Conservative Mind in Postwar America* (USA: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3.

³² Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” in *The 60s Without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres et al., 207.

³³ Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (USA: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 6.

The growth of suburbia represents the most widespread shift that became emblematic of late capitalism, due to its reliance on a messy conglomerate of utopian individualization and communitarian utopias. In the aftermath of World War II and the concurrent end to the nation's Great Depression, the housing industry in the United States entered a period of massive expansion. This responded not only to the long-term hiatus that the business had entered during the Depression, but also to the explosive growth of the demand for housing from new families during the postwar Baby Boom. This expanded construction largely took place within suburban areas on the outskirts of cities, where massive amounts of land could be obtained more cheaply than within city limits. This also increased the amount of space available for the assembly line-style mass construction then in vogue, and placed developers outside of the reach of urban governing bodies. White flight from the cities to the suburbs separated American society explicitly into racialized haves and have-nots, with both labor and capital segregating themselves into suburbs that monopolized the skills and knowledge necessary to flourish in the technologically-focused structure of corporate liberalism. As historian Thomas Jackson put it, "the middle class created safe havens isolated from the social costs and social problems of the cities."³⁴ The spatial dislocations of the suburban shift created middle-class communities outside of city tax bases, increasingly leaving them to the urban underclass. Suburbia, and the associated commodification of space and spatial rhetoric, continued the intertwining of late capitalism and the middle class.

³⁴ Thomas F. Jackson, "The State, the Movement, and the Urban Poor: The War on Poverty and Political Mobilization in the 1960s," in *The "Underclass" Debate*, ed. Michael Katz (USA: Princeton University Press, 1992), 409. See also Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

In a larger sense, all of the above—late capitalism, suburbia, and the middle class—worked together to enact the massive American consumer culture of the latter half of the twentieth century. By consumption, here, I mean the process by which individuals maintain and reproduce both their selves and their social standings by means of their choices in commodities.³⁵ In late capitalism, especially, American culture is fixated on these kinds of expressive commodity choices made in the free market by individuals, increasingly dedicated to never-ending novelty, and all on a massive scale. To wit, in the post-war era, not only did the suburban explosion entail the consumption of huge numbers of houses, but of automobiles, home furnishings, and various other items oriented toward the suburbanite's "wheeled, electrified, and begadeted way of life," as a contemporary journalist phrased it.³⁶ As the landscape most often associated with such rampant materialism and the emphasis on "keeping up with the Joneses," suburbia provided an obvious physical dimension to the expressions of late capitalist mass culture. Indeed, on a more intangible realm, the suburbs themselves functioned as products offered up for the public to consume: salable packets of nature, community, and even "home."

Suburbia, in addition to this more generalized idea of consumption, provided an important backdrop for the narratives of these radical middle-class movements. The New Left, Floyd McKissick's black capitalists, and the feminists of *Ms.* shared a sometimes uncomfortable but unavoidably revealing relationship with the suburbs. The majority of the members of SDS spent their formative years in the suburbs, and much of the cultural

³⁵ Bottomore, *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 92.

³⁶ "The New America," *Newsweek*, April 1, 1957, 40.

manifestation of the New Left was predicated upon a rejection of such materialist conformity. At the same time, however, SDS spent a great deal of time and effort attempting to improve the lot of the poor of the country, many of whom wanted only to buy into the suburban lifestyle. McKissick, on the other hand, faced the uncomfortable reality that suburbs often served as redoubts of racial segregation and redlining. At the same time, he highlighted suburbia's planned character and mixture of urban and rural characteristics in his own rhetoric surrounding Soul City. The editors of *Ms.*, meanwhile, relied on a middle-class voice to sell their version of second-wave feminism to a wide audience of readers. In the world of late capitalist America, targeting the middle class entailed playing to a suburban viewpoint.

For all of these movements, suburbia provided an ideal way to mix the discussions of communitarianism and consumption. Many of the mass-produced suburban housing developments centered around shopping malls. This located them explicitly within the national emphasis on consumption and a mass scale, whether in terms of media, reproducibility, production, or consumption. One could go so far as to describe this formulation as the creation myth of American suburbs. On a larger scale, these suburban developments occupied an intimate space within the intersection of late capitalism and the liberal state, as the Cold War drew the American government into a candidly supportive relationship with the market in an ironic combination of statist encouragement and private sector growth. This relationship was not lost on the oppositional movements of the day, which often conflated the consensus mindset, the liberal state, and consumer capitalism.

One of the most forceful expressions of this relationship took place in a model home at the American National Exhibit in Moscow on July 24, 1959 during the impromptu “Kitchen Debate” between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In this discussion, Khrushchev insistently mocked the commodities of American capitalism: “Don’t you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down? Many things you’ve shown us are interesting but they are not needed in life. They have no useful purpose. They are merely gadgets.” Nixon, in response, attempted to defend these gadgets as life-improving and labor-saving devices designed to “make easier the life of our housewives” that remained affordable even for striking steelworkers. The strength of the American system, Nixon insisted, rested on commodities in the free market: “To us, diversity, the right to choose... is the most important thing... We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice.” Nixon even extended the consumer mindset into the realm of ideology, insisting that “You can learn from us and we can learn from you. Let the people choose the kind of house, the kind of soup, *the kind of ideas they want.*” In the end, was it not “better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?” Krushchev agreed, but continued to criticize not only the planned obsolescence of American products but also the entire mindset of the American capitalist economy.³⁷

As historian Elaine Tyler May has pointed out, Nixon’s argument here—particularly regarding housewives—rested on the ideological American belief that “[c]onsumerism was

³⁷ “The Two Worlds: A Day-Long Debate,” *New York Times*, 25 July 1959. [Emphasis added.]

not an end in itself; it was the means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility.”³⁸ The relationship goes even deeper than this, however. Capitalism, of course, requires expansion to survive, in the form of either new products or new markets—hence the fetishization of novelty in the modern era. The petit-bourgeois, or that stratum of the middle class that operates independent businesses, is necessary for this expansion insofar as it provides business and product innovations to fulfill consumer needs. This proves particularly ironic in late capitalism, with its insistence on gargantuan corporate entities, which continually grind out of existence the small businesses of the middle class.³⁹ The salve for this tension, again, lay in the common acceptance of the American Dream, the possibility of class elevation, particularly from petit-bourgeoisie to haute-bourgeoisie. Such mobility, combined with the consumer culture’s democratic emphasis on wish fulfillment, contributed greatly to the American argument against the USSR’s “really existing socialism.”

Apropos of this debate, the government sought to promote mass consumption as much as possible, but found itself constrained to building helpful infrastructure and providing subsidies to promote growth in order to avoid any outright statist construction that would compromise its ideological position. Consumption of mass-produced items, as both a cause and an effect of the suburban explosion, reverberated with the ways Americans understood the role of the public, the state, and the market. As Harry Truman phrased it in 1946, where “private enterprise is unable to provide the necessary housing, it becomes the responsibility

³⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (USA: Basic Books, 1999), 12.

³⁹ Bechhofer and Elliott, “The Petite Bourgeoisie in Late Capitalism.”

of the Government to do so. But it is primarily a job for private enterprise to do.”⁴⁰ To that end, the government left the actual building of houses to the construction industry, and instead aided the process through programs designed to ease the public’s process of “consuming” homes, most particularly via the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the “GI Bill.”⁴¹

The GI Bill was instrumental in the evolution of the post-war middle class, an intervention by which the government created an entire class of veterans with subsidized homes and university degrees, who rapidly found eager employers in the growing corporate world.⁴² The federally guaranteed social safety nets provided many of the new, exclusively white, suburbanites with increased opportunities for commercial consumption not only through increased salaries and spending power, but also via the increasingly common emphasis on shopping on credit. In this manner, the government not only increased the quality of life and purchasing power of the growing middle class, but also boosted the national economy as a whole, collaborating with the public in the creation of a system that continued the country’s ascent out of the Depression by addressing the nation’s newfound prosperity and population boom. The government intervened in the process in a number of other ways, of course, most egregiously in the creation of the interstate system and various

⁴⁰ Harry S Truman, "Radio Report to the American People on the Status of the Reconversion Program," in The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12489> (accessed 30 November 2006).

⁴¹ This discussion of the FHA and GI Bill and their ramifications informed largely by Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 203-205.

⁴² Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (USA: Vintage Books, 2004), 139 and 142.

other road-building projects. The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, passed by Congress in 1956, authorized the construction and upkeep of 41,000 miles of roadway, supported in perpetuity by a “Highway Trust Fund” into which the revenues collected from gas taxes were exclusively funneled.⁴³ As historian Kenneth Jackson pointed out, the non-divertability of these funds ensured that the interstate system would be kept in continual repair, to the detriment of any other public works with which the proceeds might have been shared. Some European systems, by contrast, use gas tax proceeds to support public transportation. In this manner, the government ensured the continued consumption of automobiles. Furthermore, with the inherent decentralization of the emerging suburban structure of the nation, the new highway system tied the new communities to the outside world, and, more importantly, to their shopping centers.⁴⁴

Appropriately enough, then, even as automotive transportation fueled both the new consumption patterns and the growth of suburbia, the Fordist operating procedure born within that industry exploded throughout the productive sector of the nation.⁴⁵ Mass-produced housing, of course, played an integral role in the rise of suburbia, but this also coincided with the growth of nationwide corporations, offering identical mass-produced goods at all of their locations. Indeed, post-war America saw the widespread replacement of urban downtowns by shopping centers made up of corporate chains. Even the food produced

⁴³ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 249-250.

⁴⁴ The development of the highway system was also largely influenced by the struggle with the Soviets: with the threat of nuclear war constantly looming over the nation, the decentralization inherent in suburban sprawl seemed to planners to present fewer convenient target sites.

⁴⁵ Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

and distributed in this period became largely mass-produced, as the quickly expanding fast-food industry established a massive presence in the shopping centers and along the road systems so necessary to this suburban arrangement.⁴⁶ The connection between Fordism and suburbia was often made explicit, as when the man behind Levittown, the first of the huge mass-produced post-war suburbs, referred to his company as the “General Motors of the housing industry.”⁴⁷ Fordism, then, informed the growth of replication and planned obsolescence in late capitalism. As one group of critical theorists reminded their readers, the car industry presented the “characteristic signifier of late capitalism.”⁴⁸

This system created a spatially divided arrangement of suburbs, workplaces, and shopping malls linked to one another by corridors of highways, which allowed them to disconnect themselves almost entirely from the outside world. The common image of the move to the suburbs as a shift “back” to a historical community vis-à-vis the strife of urban living relies on a fundamentally flawed premise, as the isolation of the suburban neighborhoods ensured that its denizens shared *less* public space with others. Furthermore, these new neighborhoods tended to be homogeneous to a fault, and the lack of communal space relegated the public sphere into private spaces. This ensured that forms of screening and exclusion could be utilized to maintain uniformity—particularly with regard to race. The manufactured nature of these neighborhoods, for the most part, meant necessarily that they lacked any actual community, with no shared history or nearby family networks. The lack of

⁴⁶ For an exploration of this shift and the countercultural opposition to it, see Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁴⁷ “Up From the Potato Fields,” *Time*, July 3, 1950, 67.

⁴⁸ Sayres et al., *The 60s Without Apology*, 3.

roots, combined with the uniformity of the housing and neighborhoods within developments, left members of these communities without many of the traditional means of relating to one another or establishing any form of comparative hierarchical structures. To that end, belongings became emblems of belonging; social signifiers of participation in the suburban structure of consumption. This emphasis on a conformity of possession and appearance was reflected in what a contemporary journalist described as a “pronounced prejudice against ‘braininess’ or ‘thinking too much,’“ leading to “a premium put on a kind of amiable, thoughtless conformity.”⁴⁹ This landscape bound the radical movements of the middle class, inasmuch as their rhetoric tended to orient itself toward its residents.

With all of this in mind, then, the three chapters of this thesis, each concerned with a specific movement, are arranged roughly chronologically. My first chapter examines the interrelationship between mass culture and the student New Left of the 1960s. Chapter two looks at the tension between individualist capitalism and communitarian utopianism in the rhetoric that Floyd McKissick used to sell his Soul City project. The final chapter, grounded in the evolving thought of radical feminist Robin Morgan, illuminates *Ms.*’s shift from an anti-capitalist radical feminism to a more pragmatic liberal feminism designed to fit the lives of the suburban middle-class. Throughout all of these investigations, I trace both their involvement with late capitalism and their relationships with the New Right. In this manner, I hope to speak both to the hegemonic power of the marketplace, and, in turn, to the regenerative capabilities of its co-optation.

⁴⁹ Harry Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs, Part II: Rugged American Collectivism," *Harper's Magazine*, December, 1953, 80.

CHAPTER I

“This Chrome-Plated Consumer’s Paradise:” The New Left and the American Consumer Culture

“We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”⁵⁰ So begins the Port Huron Statement of 1962, the manifesto of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), soon to become the premier political organization of radical students in that most radical of American decades. The New Left of the 1960s, of which SDS was the epicenter, found itself in the difficult position of espousing radicalism—in either reform or revolution—from within a “post-scarcity” society of abundance.⁵¹ It is telling, in this context, that SDS foregrounded its first major ideological document with the admission that its mostly white constituents were “bred in at least modest comfort,” identifying them more closely with the middle class than with the proletariat, the traditional lifeblood of the Left. These students, emerging from the postwar “affluent society” and its stultifying emphases on conformity and consumption, focused almost as much on a critique of the product-oriented middle-class lifestyles characteristic of late capitalism as an insistence of the right of the masses to economic equality. As Tom Hayden, the primary author of the Statement, put it, where “poor people” organized because they had “nothing to gain in the status system,” student activists mobilized

⁵⁰ Students for a Democratic Society, “The Port Huron Statement,” in James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 338.

⁵¹ The New Left was not, it must be admitted, the first movement on the Left to find itself in such a position. See, for example, Robert Crunden’s *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives’ Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (USA: Illini Books, 1984), which argues forcefully for the importance of “economic guilt” as a motivating factor in the participation of the well-to-do in the Progressive movement of 1889-1920.

“because, in a sense, they have gained too much.”⁵²

The Port Huron Convention of 1962, whose fifty-nine delegates helped produce the manifesto, marked the beginning of the coalescence of both the organization and the larger New Left.⁵³ The 1969 convention, held in Chicago, counted some 1,500 delegates in attendance, surrounded by “a veritable counterconvention of reporters...FBI agents...and hundreds of police” and marked the end of SDS as a viable organization.⁵⁴ At this final conference—by which point many of the founding members had ceased any active involvement—sectarian squabbles and power struggles erupted between factions that had previously managed to contain their tensions. At its most basic, this chaotic implosion revolved around the Revolutionary Youth Movement Weathermen, devoted to violent confrontation with the system, expelling the Maoist Worker Student Alliance. At the same time, the Black Panther’s adoption of “pussy power” uncomfortably drew a mocking attention to the growing divisions along race and gender lines within the movement. These splits led to the dissolution of SDS as any kind of coherent national force, and, soon thereafter, the collapse of the New Left itself. In the seven years that it enjoyed a meaningful existence, however, these student activists participated in and drew attention to many of the progressive political issues of the Sixties: civil rights, women’s liberation, the anti-war movement, and environmentalism.

Throughout the narrative of the New Left, late capitalism’s focus on mass

⁵² Tom Hayden, “The Politics of the Movement,” in *The New Left: A Documentary History*, ed. Massimo Teodori (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), 207.

⁵³ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 3.

⁵⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (USA: Bantam Books, 1987), 387.

consumption played a larger role in the rise and ideology of the student movement than scholarship has previously recognized. A critique of the national consumer culture and its suburban setting, focused on its alienating and inauthentic nature, typically initially motivated students toward the resurgent Left—with the Civil Rights Movement often providing the final push over the outside edge of liberalism. Continuing beyond this early impetus, alienation from mass culture suffused much of the New Left program. At the same time, the hegemonic power of late capitalism, in concert with this focus on consumerism, produced a co-optive relationship between the New Left and the mainstream, and kept consumption at the fore of American discourse. The consumer culture, then, continued to inform not only the New Left's motivations and their failures, but also their successes. This is not to suggest that the radical movement was entirely powerless, but rather that, despite the activists' best efforts, it could not escape functioning in a dialectic relation to the mainstream. From the earliest days of the movement, as the Port Huron Statement indicated, a feeling of existential guilt about their economically comfortable upbringing linked the New Left and the affluent society, drawing the children of “at least modest comfort” into revolt against the system that had produced them. This existential angst engendered by the consumer culture also framed the movement's search for authenticity, particularly as expressed through SDS's desire for “participatory democracy,” and their related rejection of the liberal society.

Both “authenticity” and “participatory democracy,” like the New Left itself, offered powerful rhetorical effects even while existing as somewhat diffuse ideals. Ironically, the adoption of these attitudes, ensuring as they did the rejection of centralized command and

dogmatism, in no small part caused the possibility of their fluid interpretations. Authenticity, borrowed in part from the French existentialists, involved, in New Leftist Richard Flacks' definition, an "acute sensitivity to hypocrisy, a wish for self-knowledge and understanding, concern that one's own personal potentialities—as well as those of others—be realized, [and a] rejection of imposed standards of behavior."⁵⁵ Lacking such a feeling of existential satisfaction within suburban living and white collar employment, New Leftists focused instead on the marginalized of the affluent society, or on their own revolutionary potential as a new, enlightened class. As Tom Hayden put it, before the explosive growth of "new working class" theories toward the end of the decade, "[w]orking in poor communities is a concrete task in which the split between job and values can be healed."⁵⁶ While the French existentialists had focused on authenticity as an expression of one's own lived experience, the New Left's interpretation involved a more utopian search for a reality central to one's ideals in order to escape their existential angst. In turn, this fostered an emphasis on growth and actualization, instrumental in the association of the personal and the political in the New Left. Problematically, this emphasis on the existential individual mirrored late capitalism's obsession with the free market individual, feeding into the New Left's conflicted relationship with the mass consumer culture. By tying authenticity so closely to personal expression, students remained in an individualist mindset, and located their personal politics dangerously close to the persona created by and expressed through commodities.

This movement of authentic individuals, in turn, necessitated a more authentic means

⁵⁵ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 205.

⁵⁶ Hayden, "The Politics of the Movement," 207.

of politicking. Participatory democracy provided—at times vaguely—a method by which individuals could work together in creating and sustaining an inclusive decision-making process. Historian James Miller, whose *Democracy is in the Streets* is largely predicated around the development of this ideal, explains that this protean term evolved throughout the decade and consistently evoked varying definitions. That said, it seemed consistently to involve combinations of localized politics, direct action, and the socialist ideal, and later began to take on an emphasis on consensus actions and decision-by-discussion. Both means and utopian end, participatory democracy, in the words of the Port Huron Statement, had “two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life,” and that “society be organized to encourage independence in men.”⁵⁷ To radical historian Staughton Lynd, an older member of the New Left, participatory democracy allowed “the building of a brotherly way of life even in the jaws of Leviathan,” but ran the risk of waffling between being “a moral gesture only” and “a determined attempt to transform the American power structure.”⁵⁸ In short, it revolved around faith that authenticity could be discovered through combining the personal and the political and rejecting authoritarianism and dogmatism.

The Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964 showcased one of the largest non-SDS expressions of the early New Left, and the rhetoric employed by spokesperson Mario Savio provided an excellent example of the movement’s fixation on authenticity and the consumer culture. Savio proclaimed that America, “[t]his chrome-plated consumers’ paradise,” this

⁵⁷ Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 14.

⁵⁸ Staughton Lynd, “The New Radicals and ‘Participatory Democracy,’” in Teodori, *The New Left*, 233.

“utopia of sterilized, automated contentment,” pressured students to “grow up to be well-behaved children.” The rise of the New Left, though, had provided “an important minority of men and women coming to the front today [who had] shown that they will die rather than be standardized, replaceable, and irrelevant.”⁵⁹ Savio, encapsulating much of the feeling of the early New Left, pointed solely to the inauthentic consumer culture for the discontent of the students, with its focus on mass conformity and materialist expression. This, despite the fact that he, like so many other activists, had first become interested in radicalism because of his involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. While Savio had no official involvement with SDS, its members often presented their discussion of the consumer culture in a similarly hyperbolic fashion. A minuscule percentage of New Leftists would actually choose death over standardization and irrelevance, but their search for authenticity did truly inspire students to try to construct an alternative to the consumer culture—both in discourse and in actuality.

After the end of the Second World War, the economic boom that finally lifted the nation from the Great Depression created the atmosphere that fostered the growth of the New Left. The stimulation of the War combined with federal intervention—in the form of continuing New Deal programs, aid for returning GIs, and Cold War-related programs—and the emerging shift to a service-based economy to boost unprecedented numbers of the population into a middle-class lifestyle. With this growth, and the coinciding explosion in

⁵⁹ Mario Savio, “An End to History,” in *The New Student Left*, ed. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 252.

suburban living, came an often-referenced emphasis on material consumption and competition, the stereotypical suburbanite aim for the best-kept lawn on the block and the acquisition of the most gadgets from Sears. The Cold War, as an idiomatic struggle between capitalism and communism, further fostered this emphasis on the commodities of the free market as markers of the superior American way of life. Looking back from 1969, members of SDS wrote that when the undercurrents that became the New Left began to stir in the 1950s, the “mainstream” was swamped with “the Cold War, Joe McCarthy, the silent generation filing into heavily-mortgaged Ozzie and Harriet suburbia.” In a telling reference to the cultural power that the New Left had already gained by the end of the decade, the pamphlet proclaimed that “[w]hile many young activists of today may find these images rather alien, this is where the history of the New Left begins.”⁶⁰

Surrounded by this suburban landscape of economic opportunity, many began to question the usefulness of traditional assessments of class. To the ideologues of the capitalist liberal state, American society consisted of the well-to-do rich and the slightly less well-to-do middle class—the poor having been done away with by widespread prosperity, which had lifted everyone to a standard of living at the very least equivalent to the traditional “middle-class” way of life.⁶¹ In lieu of a proletarian revolution, the American system, by means of consumption and the marketplace, had seemingly solved the problem of class—the masses having become “haves” rather than “have-nots.” The members of SDS, of course, rejected

⁶⁰ Students for a Democratic Society, “SDS: An Introduction,” in *Vandals in the Bomb Factory: the History and Literature of Students for a Democratic Society*, ed. G. Louis Heath (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1976), 211.

⁶¹ Paul Lyons, *New Left, New Right, and the Legacy of the Sixties* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 32.

this interpretation. They similarly rejected the traditional class division of America, emphasizing instead the proletarianization of the middle class, not the resolution of class differences. One SDS pamphlet, for example, explained that the activists of the New Left had “rejected the false notion that most Americans are ‘middle-class.’”⁶² Instead, “professional, service, white-color, and university-trained technical workers” belonged in the same class as “blue-collar industrial workers,” and needed to identify “the corporate capitalist source of their exploitation and their common interest in uniting against its oppression.”⁶² The majority of Americans, of course, disagreed with this critique of capitalism, emphasizing instead the success of the liberal capitalist system. Many used this more positive interpretation, most famously articulated in Daniel Bell’s 1960 book *The End of Ideology*, to preclude the usefulness of a Marxist reading of American society. This difference left the New Left open to indictment from the Right as un-American and alien, even as SDS fused Marxism with a more traditionally American focus on rugged individualism.

The New Left’s rejection of the middle-class suburban lifestyle—the mass conformity of which offended such individualists—often went hand-in-hand with a rejection of the liberal political system. As Todd Gitlin, a Harvard-educated member of SDS, put it, the “unchallenged domination of the values of the marketplace,” wherein “profit still motivates production, communication, education,” revealed the “sham of pluralism.” Indeed, “[i]f the sheer bulk of goods is all-important, who needs democracy? How can the New Deal prevail against the Fast Deal?”⁶³ The national emphasis on business not only influenced the SDS

⁶² Students for a Democratic Society, “SDS: An Introduction,” 213.

⁶³ Todd Gitlin, “Power and the Myth of Progress,” in Teodori, *The New Left*, 189.

critique of capitalism and politics, but also their rejection of the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War.⁶⁴ An SDS open letter to supporters of anti-war Democrat Eugene McCarthy prior to the 1968 Democratic convention also referenced this relationship, sarcastically describing the American effort against the “International Communist Conspiracy” as “our valorous national effort to defeat it in [sic] behalf of democracy, Shakespeare, miniskirts, Caltex, and so on.”⁶⁵ To the members of the New Left, the dogmatic anti-communism of the time both distracted from the real issues of modern life—power dynamics, inauthenticity, the unjust war in Vietnam, and so forth—and provided an easy way for the consensus-oriented mainstream to dismiss radical organizing.

Growing up within this system, future New Leftists relied on a variety of sources for their education, in both political and cultural—or perhaps sentimental—realms. As with many other student movements, the members of SDS commonly held the conceit that the New Left had issued forth in a “virgin birth.” As two activist scholars put it, the New Left “was not mechanically determined but rather it created itself.”⁶⁶ The consensus mindset preceding their arrival, combined with the rampant anti-communism of both the mainstream and the remnants of the Old Left, had convinced students that a generational void existed between the Old and the New. Indeed, where the Old Left had focused on a doctrinaire Leftist class-based politics, the New Left often heavily modified this tradition with an emphasis on the individual, redolent of both the American rugged individual and certain

⁶⁴ Students for a Democratic Society, “SDS: An Introduction” In Heath, 211.

⁶⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, “Dear McCarthy Supporters: An Open Letter,” in Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 223. Caltex is a chain of gas stations operated by the Chevron Corporation.

⁶⁶ Ronald Aronson and John C. Cowley, “The New Left in the United States,” in “All We Are Saying...:” *The Philosophy of the New Left*, ed. Arthur Lothstein (New York: Capricorn Books, 1971), 35.

anarchist schools of thought. As historian Maurice Isserman has shown, however, the links between the two movements are much stronger than the activists or the initial histories of the movement had believed.⁶⁷ The mythic power of this void as a rhetorical device aside, the claim of a spontaneous generation of radicalism on the part of the New Left proves entirely unsupportable, belied even by the publications of SDS itself. Even outside of the modified Marxist tradition that they had adapted from the Old Left, these student activists possessed a large variety of intellectual debts, ranging from radical academics like C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse to popular authors like David Riesman to the existentialist novels of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

New Leftists often acknowledged Mills as their intellectual forebear, and his influence on them cannot be overstated. Born in 1916, Mills's writings provided an existing concrete academic framework for the discontent that many of them had previously felt about the affluent society. A Texan who smoked cigars, rode a motorcycle, and succumbed to a heart attack at the age of 46, Mills' rugged outlaw persona surely contributed to his mythic standing among the anarchic individualists of the New Left. A sociologist by training, Mills's academic work focused largely on the elite power structure of the modern American society and the alienating effects of the consumer culture. In his 1959 essay "Culture and Politics," Mills posed a rhetorical question that largely prefigured many of the later concerns of SDS regarding modern life: "[M]ust we not face the possibility that the human mind as a social fact might be deteriorating in quality and cultural level, and yet not many would notice it

⁶⁷ Maurice Isserman. *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (USA: Basic Books, 1987).

because of the overwhelming accumulation of technological gadgets?" In Mills' view, this had resulted from the "overdeveloped" state of society in the United States, wherein "the standard of living dominates the style of life" and inhabitants were "possessed... collectively, by the maintenance of conspicuous production; individually, by the frenzied pursuit and maintenance of commodities."⁶⁸ Clearly, the founders of SDS had predecessors who had already begun articulating the relationship between the "accumulation of gadgets" and the alienating effect of modern life. New Leftists built on Mills's observations, and they often based their search for authenticity around these exact terms. Mills, however, possessed a more pessimistic outlook than did his followers in the New Left. Most of the time, he aptly pointed out the problems of society, but rarely offered recommendations as to how to fix them. The radical students of SDS, conversely, with their focus on living as though the revolution had already happened, possessed a myriad of ideas to fix the system in which they lived.

In 1960, *The New Left Review* published Mills' hugely influential "Letter to the New Left," wherein he emphasized the rising importance of intellectuals and students to the radical cause. Here, Mills questioned the continuing tendency of Leftists to "cling so mightily to 'the working class' as *the historic agency*" working towards revolution. Dismissing this "labor metaphysic" as "a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic," Mills insisted that in the modern world the students had both the motivations and the means to revolt: "[W]ho is it that is getting fed up? Who is it that is getting disgusted

⁶⁸ C. Wright Mills, "Culture and Politics," in *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*, ed. Irving Louis Horowitz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 245.

with what Marx called 'all the old crap?' Who is it that is thinking and acting in radical ways? All over the world... the answer is the same: it is the young intelligentsia."⁶⁹ From this initial move away from traditional Marxism, the New Left grew to embrace the new class theories of student vanguardism, an amalgamation of Marxism and a rugged individualism that drew as much on the "American Assumption" as on older anarchist tropes.

While Mills intended his work largely for the radical academic community, a variety of more popular writers also addressed the problems of consumption and authenticity in American society in ways that informed the SDS critique, although often in a much less radical manner. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), and John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) all investigated the foibles of the consensus/consumption mindset, but typically in an optimistic manner: Galbraith, for example, wrote that poverty in America was "no longer a mass affliction, [but] more nearly an afterthought." The New Left, even while sharing some of the same misgivings, questioned the validity of the liberal critique: Tom Hayden described their liberal elders as "a generation which cannot avoid reading criticism of itself and its fathers," to the degree that "the media have flooded the market with inexpensive paperbacks" condemning some of the effects of late capitalism—but never all of them.⁷⁰

At times, the New Left critique of society seemed simply a more radical extension of

⁶⁹ C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," in "Takin' it to the streets: " A Sixties Reader, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 78-79.

⁷⁰ Tom Hayden, "Why This Erupting Generation?" quoted in James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 50-51.

mainstream liberalism's self-reflection. Indeed, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a mainstay of the consensus society, complained in 1960 that the objective of the American power structure seemed to be to "produce more gadgets and gimmicks to overwhelm our bodies and distract our minds," instead of working "to produce better people or better schools or better health or better national defense or better opportunities for cultural and spiritual fulfillment." In Schlesinger's eyes, "against what we self-righteously condemn as the godless materialism of the Communists we seem to have dedicated ourselves to a godly materialism of our own."⁷¹ One would be hard-pressed, outside of the writing of Mills, to find a more precise starting point from which the views of many members of SDS would evolve.

Their chief difference lay in the mood or overall message of the writing: just as Mills differed from his protégés in his pessimism, Schlesinger and the other liberals expressed a great sense of optimism even while criticizing the consumer culture. The upheavals of the two prior decades, Schlesinger asserts, had caused the "torpor" of the 1950s, which simply followed a larger pattern of American history that would sort itself out in time. Echoing Galbraith, Schlesinger closed his piece with the assertion that while "[t]here are still pools of poverty which have to be mopped up... the central problem [of the Sixties] will be increasingly that of fighting for individual dignity, identity and fulfillment in an affluent mass society."⁷² While Mills believed that little could be done to fix the system outside of identifying its problems, Schlesinger argued that American society would fix itself or, at the very least, responsible liberals working within mainstream society could right its wrongs.

⁷¹ Arthur Schlesinger, "The New Mood in Politics," in *The Sixties: The Art, Attitudes, Politics, and Media of Our Most Explosive Decade*, ed. Gerald Howard (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1995), 46.

⁷² Arthur Schlesinger, "The New Mood in Politics," 54.

Members of the New Left mostly advocated the outright abandonment of the liberal system in favor of a new way of life, more attuned to the personal issues of modern existence, and outside the sway of an empty consumerism.

The guiding countercultural lights of the 1950s, the “Beats,” called for a similar abandonment of the system, and provided sentimental guidance for the New Leftists who followed in their footsteps. Al Haber, the first president of SDS, described the Beats as “all those who have deviated from the traditional college patterns” who were “variously professional students, bohemians, political types, and non-students who still seem to be around.” SDS, in Haber’s view, had “drawn heavily, if not always reliably” on the Beats, from whom the New Left had inherited “the issue of dress standards which split many a picket line.” This issue continued to be “the focus of controversy in striking a balance between the public image of the movement and the very importance of this group (which is, by definition, out of the main line of campus life).”⁷³ Here, not only did Haber draw a direct line between the Beats’ rejection of standard consumption—via “dress standards”—and the practices of the ‘60s counterculture, but also with SDS’s problems relating to both the Old Left and the mainstream. This rejection of standard dressing habits, borrowed from the Beats, presents one of the most obvious examples of the lasting cultural influence of the student movement, continuing past their complete dissolution as a political force.⁷⁴

⁷³ Al Haber, “From Protest to Radicalism,” in *The New Student Left*, ed. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale,³⁹

⁷⁴ For an in-depth look at the effect of the counterculture on the men’s fashion industry in particular, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 184-204.

In addition to habits regarding accoutrement, the cultural outcasts of the 1950s provided many of the suburban children who became movement activists with their first role models of youth frustrated with or alienated by Middle America. Holden Caulfield, the adolescent hero of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), possessed an iconic hatred of "phonies" that relied on a similar yearning for authenticity as that which consumed so many members of SDS. Similarly, Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road* (1957) and Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* (1956), the two canonical literary works of the Beat movement, offered both expressions of disgust and avenues of escape for their readers. In addition to works of literature like these, a few movies provided a cornerstone for the emerging movement. As a pamphlet intended to familiarize students with SDS put it, with the "dominant social themes" of the post-war era "being affluence, consumption, and adjustment," young people began to express "their cultural oppression and personal alienation with growing intensity. Out of apathy and the gray flannel suit emerged James Dean, Marlon Brando, and the Angry Young Man—the Beat Generation."⁷⁵ Once again, the "gray flannel suit" stood as a symbol of the American middle class, ironically even as mainstream movie stars provided symbols of the angry counterculture.

The difference between the Beats and the New Leftists, then, lay mainly in the politicization of the latter—where Beats were content with an existence centered on coffee shops and art shows, the New Left insisted on altering the very structure of American society. From the Beats and the existentialists, students borrowed the idea of a life and a

⁷⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, "SDS: An Introduction," 210.

society centered on the individual—they just added the emphasis on personal politics. The initial seeds of SDS sprouted within the unfortunately acronymed SLID (Student League for Industrial Democracy), the youth branch of the League for Industrial Democracy, an American association of non-Leninist socialists. Founded in 1905, SLID had peaked in the years prior to World War II, then increasingly floundered as the century wore on, and collapsed almost entirely within the affluent consensus society.⁷⁶ The rise of student alienation and the successful example of radicalism provided by the Civil Rights Movement revitalized the organization, which renamed itself Students for a Democratic Society in 1959. Regarding that shift, SDS's first president Al Haber remarked that “SLID was just a laughable name, particularly for an organization in decline” and attributed little significance to the re-branding.⁷⁷

The new name, however, represented one of the first outward manifestations of the distancing of the New Left from the Old. “Students for a Democratic Society” reflected the new group’s emphasis on a more extensive social critique, dropping entirely the old name’s titular attention to industry and, by extension, the idea of revolution as the exclusive realm of the proletariat. In turn, as in so many things, SDS could never settle on a firm position on a revolutionary scenario to replace the labor metaphysic. At times the majority of members emphasized a traditional Leninist theory of vanguardism, wherein party intellectuals would awaken the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. Other moments saw the supremacy of the idea of the revolutionary role of students as an oppressed group acting on the same level

⁷⁶ G. Louis Heath, *Vandals in the Bomb Factory*, 1-7.

⁷⁷ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 38.

as laborers, the poor, and minorities. Most commonly, particularly in its latter years, SDS accepted the Millsian proposition rejecting the “labor metaphysic” and emphasizing the vanguard-like role of the students and young intellectuals, but without the Leninist focus on a centrally organized Communist Party. The continual variation among these viewpoints came about largely because of the New Left’s focus on authenticity in every aspect of life, from the practice of consuming to the practice of politics, as expressed through participatory democracy. This led the group to reject both dogmatic ideology and most forms of centralized power, thereby allowing many different, and at times contradictory, positions to flourish under the banner of Students for a Democratic Society.

The irony of this search for localized authenticity is that while it motivated many members of SDS to reject the phony plasticity of the affluent society, it also posed special problems for its more self-reflective participants. The manifestos and working papers produced by SDS during the 1960s commonly emphasized not only the plight of the poor and marginalized, but also the alienating nature of the middle-class suburban lifestyle, an implicit reference to the middle-class origins of the authors themselves. In his retrospective look at the movement, former SDS member Richard Flacks observed that “[t]he problem for the left in post-industrial societies is that it seeks a revolution when everyday life is not only possible but indeed compelling.”⁷⁸ Even as these children of affluence attempted to fashion a more authentic existence for themselves, they proved remarkably unsuccessful in spreading their dissatisfaction into the larger culture. They faced a similar lack of success in their attempts to

⁷⁸ Richard Flacks, “Making History vs. Making Life: Dilemmas of an American Left,” in *Toward a History of the New Left*, ed. R. David Myers (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989).¹³⁴

radicalize the poor, who tended to be more interested in buying into the middle-class consumer culture than in overthrowing it. Casey Hayden, an important voice in the growth of feminist analysis within the radical movements of the 1960s, wrote in a 1964 article on that in America “no one has real power to shape his own life, but most people are comfortable enough not to care.”⁷⁹ This connection between affluence and apathy proved hugely popular in SDS writings from the period. Some echoed Hayden in drawing a direct causal link between the two, arguing that widespread economic security bred apathy toward the plight of others. Others bemoaned the nation's refusal to utilize its newly expanded resources, not seeing wealth as an existential sin in and of itself, but faulting its lack of progressive application. Carey McWilliams wrote in 1965, for example, that Americans had, “as never before, the resources, the wealth, the science, the technology, the organizational skills which could be used to fashion utopias without end.” Despite these expanded resources, he continued, in late capitalist America “utopias have gone out of fashion; indeed anti-utopias are 'in,' and utopias are 'out.'”⁸⁰ Utopia, here, seems to be taken in a classical Leftist sense of a worker’s state –for the classless affluent society, replete with the rugged individuals who somehow kept up with the Joneses while simultaneously expressing their own character by consumption, was nothing if not a utopian ideal.

In retrospect, many former members of SDS explicitly acknowledged the importance not only of growing up in the middle class, but also of being preeminent within their peer

⁷⁹ Casey Hayden, “Raising the Question of Who Decides,” in “*Takin’ it to the streets,*” ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, 82.

⁸⁰ Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, *The New Student Left*, ix.

groups. Richard Flacks, for example, wrote in 1974 that many of the founding members of SDS “had been socialized for elite roles” and “encouraged by their parents toward high academic achievement.” He also acknowledged the liberal bent of the parents of many student activists, who had “stressed a moral obligation to work for some kind of social service rather than simply for material gain,” and taught their children “to feel that they could and should be outstanding, [but to experience] profound guilt if they saw themselves as self-

⁸¹ Elinor Langer similarly acknowledged the preeminent status of the average New

Leftist: “an elite” group, “the most privileged among the already privileged.”⁸² Like Flacks,

she acknowledged economic guilt as a motivator, but emphasized the influence of life in a

post-scarcity society over that of the liberalism of their preceding generation. To Langer,

student activists were not necessarily “better people with a keener morality than [their]

parents,” but rather simply had grown up without facing the fear of poverty. Their parents

“have the money for us if we should need it badly enough,” and students would “inherit the

goods if it should just-so-happen that in our old age we should seek possessions, or even if

⁸³ not.” By referring to suburban affluence as an inescapable fate and a safety net that

permeated the New Left, Langer’s comments typified the co-optive relationship between late

capitalism and the student activists.

Most concretely, the commodities so integral to the affluent consumer culture provided a specific focus for the New Left’s critique of modern liberal society. The amount

⁸¹ Richard Flacks, “Making History vs. Making Life,” 139.

⁸² Elinor Langer, “Notes for Next Time: A Memoir of the 1960s” in *Toward a History of the New Left*, ed. R. David Myers, 78.

⁸³ Ibid., 95.

of money spent on developing new gadgets, along with the rise of planned obsolescence and the explosion of advertising and mass marketing, gave student activists a visible contrast with the lack of social welfare and authentic relationships in America. They likewise used the rapid pace of technological development to underscore what they saw as the inauthenticity and confusion of modern life: “Our phenomenal success in creating an enormous wealth-producing apparatus has blinded us to the implications; we do not know what should come next because we scarcely know what it is that we have achieved.”⁸⁴

The presentation of modern society as a monolithic system propelled more by past momentum than by any conscious direction crops up repeatedly in SDS manifestos and position papers. In particular, the war in Vietnam, the focus of so much protest throughout the decade, stood as a particularly irrational expression of this inertia—a morally empty explosion of violence and imperialism lacking any clear-cut purpose. On the domestic side, the Port Huron Statement lamented the fact that “[w]e live amidst a national celebration of economic prosperity while poverty and deprivation remain an unbreakable way of life for millions in the ‘affluent society,’ including many of our own generation.” Notably, activist students often linked this view of society to what they saw as the inevitable life’s path waiting for them after college: a career “often unfulfilling and victimizing, accepted as a channel to status or plenty, if not a way to pay the bills, rarely as a means of understanding and controlling self and events.” At work or at home, “the individual is regulated as part of the system, a consuming unit, bombarded by hard-sell soft-sell, lies and semi-true appeals

⁸⁴ Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, *The New Student Left*, x.

and his basest drives.”⁸⁵

Poverty, both spiritual and economic, had replaced class at the heart of the New Left critique. Where the Old Left, from Marx on, had typically presented a post-class system of abundance as a utopian ideal, the New Left knew firsthand the existential malaise that could coexist with affluence. In viewing modern society as one focused on a meaningless and unfulfilling existence and construing the consumer culture as the most egregiously hollow aspect of post-war America, these students shifted the focus of radicalism from class redemption to the achievement of a degree of authenticity within individual lives. Furthermore, New Leftists often conflated this culture with the adult world—more specifically the white male adult world—that had produced such a lifestyle, and which many student activists were terrified of being coerced into joining. SDS, particularly in the latter part of the 1960s, often implicated the liberal political structure as an outgrowth of the same problems that led to the mindless consumer culture. In the modern world, a citizen “is always told what he is supposed to enjoy while being told, too, that he is a ‘free’ man because of ‘free enterprise.’”⁸⁶ Conflating the standard American political procedure with a culture based on mindless consumption and unfulfilling work and then rejecting this multipart structure, members of SDS refused the efficacy of a formal political party—another difference with the Old Left. The materialist emphasis on the structure of the “enormous wealth-producing apparatus” was one of the New Left’s largest borrowings from the Old, familiar to any Marxist. The members of SDS, however, often went beyond that in adding an individualized

⁸⁵ Students for a Democratic Society, “The Port Huron Statement,” 338.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

sense of confusion and alienation in the search for authenticity. This addition tied in closely with the New Left's emphatic rejection of ideology and rigid party lines. Doing so allowed them to update parts of Marx's tradition while rejecting others in order to tailor their approach to what they saw as the overly rational consumption-oriented modern society.

As mentioned above, the New Left repeatedly pointed to the emphases on corporate profit and technological gadgets rather than a humanitarian concern for the well being of the poor as a failing of the American political structure. Indeed, one of the central paradoxes of the New Left was their simultaneous insistence on a critique of the middle class and consumption and their call for aid to the poor in order that they could gain the spending power to join the middle class in their rush for goods and property. While this can partially be explained as an attempt to assuage the economic—and existential—guilt of the affluent New Leftist, on some level the irony remains that SDS attempted to help the poor buy into the system that they were trying so desperately to escape. Todd Gitlin wrote in his 1964 essay “The Battlefields and the War” that SDS, as “organizers, and organizers of organizers,” had selected as their battlefields the “communities of under-America: cities and towns and rural spreads where people live materially deprived, politically alienated and used, and victimized by social and economic institutions beyond their comprehension and reach.” Once again, one finds the New Left's emphasis on the incomprehensibility and alienation of the modern economy, blending compassion with a condescension born of educational elitism. Gitlin reiterated these themes throughout this essay: late capitalist America “perverts people's notions about themselves into fantasies that perpetuate an unjust system” wherein “[c]ultural

and commercial pressures generate artificial 'needs' that, in the minds of the victims, displace more genuine human needs." As aspects of late capitalism, the consumer culture and the techno-rational state, Gitlin argues, operated in similar manners toward "the poor, the unemployed, [and] the Negroes" as it did toward the nascent Leftists. Gitlin, in laying out a laundry list of the system's fallacies, bounced hyperbolically between the concerns of the poor, African Americans, and the concerns of the student almost at random: "If you can get to the suburbs you'll be green, safe, and happy... Negroes are inferior... What you really need is Dial Soap and tailfins... If you get a Ph. D. you will be needed and happy... You are powerful because you can vote... and so on down the line." From this implicit linkage of the experiences of students and minorities, Gitlin turns to an explicit connection between the two under the crushing power of the cultural mainstream: "As Baldwin puts it, after a lifetime of brutalization, 'you become a nigger': You act out the image that the Respectables have of you."⁸⁷

In an attempt to rectify some of these injustices, SDS initiated the "Economic Research and Action Project" (ERAP) in 1963. Under this initiative, activists lived in voluntary poverty in communes strategically located in indigent urban communities throughout the North and Northeast. While there, students attempted to enact the SDS ideal of participatory democracy, subjecting every decision to a group discussion in which every voice possessed equal weight. Simultaneously, they worked to engage the local poor in discussions about their state of being, and to encourage them to work toward organizing

⁸⁷ Todd Gitlin, "The Battlefields and the War," in *The New Student Left*, ed. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, 125-126.

groups and movements for their own betterment. Ultimately, ERAP failed abjectly, due to a variety of conceptual and organizational missteps. The structure of participatory democracy utilized in the communes led to seemingly endless debates on every group action, which had to continue until all members achieved unanimous agreement for every decision. However, ERAP itself lacked unanimous support within SDS, with many agreeing with Al Haber, who dismissed the “cult of the ghetto” as “slightly sick” and insisted that the organization should continue to focus on campus organization.⁸⁸

The most intrinsically problematic part of ERAP, and the largest factor in its failure, lay again in the ironic relationship between New Leftists, the middle-class consumer culture, and the poor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the residents of these ghettos found it difficult to trust or associate closely with young people who had pretentiously rejected their economic well-being in order to be closer to the “uncorrupted” poor. Students were not unaware of this problem. Tom Hayden, for example, wrote in 1966 that when a student comes into a poor community, “[h]e is an outsider, he is over-educated, he has nothing concrete to offer people and often, he is white in a Negro ghetto.”⁸⁹ Where Hayden believed these temporary obstacles easily overcome by a fighting spirit, others were not so optimistic. Tom Kahn, an early member of SDS who left as the group moved farther away from the Old Left focus on the proletariat, wrote in 1966 that the New Left’s “anti-materialism” and “insouciance with regard to material circumstances” could exist only after an upbringing of “relative economic security.” People whose childhoods “were disrupted or menaced by material deprivation,” on

⁸⁸ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 190.

⁸⁹ Tom Hayden, “The Politics of the Movement,” 207.

the other hand, could not help feeling “some anxiety at the prospect of living in poverty, even if only as a temporary project. Voluntary poverty, precisely because it is voluntary, is never real poverty.” Furthermore, Kahn, like Flacks and Langer, noted that the New Left, rather than being “merely middle-class,” instead sprang “largely from the affluent, professional, liberal middle class” and that the high level of education that New Leftists had attained gave them an even greater chance of escaping a self-induced poverty than would otherwise be possible.⁹⁰

In addition to the existential appeal of the poor, authentically located on the margins of liberal society, political scientist Richard J. Ellis suggests that SDS's rejection of the Old Left's labor metaphysic drew the New Left's romantic attention toward the poor and marginalized.⁹¹ Where traditional communists had followed Marx and Engels in rejecting the revolutionary potential of the *lumpenproletariat*, the New Left of the early-to-mid-Sixties turned the tables by emphasizing the role of the poor and dispossessed in a modern American revolution.⁹² This emphasis followed not only their Millsian belief in the ability of students and intellectuals to act as a revolutionary vanguard, but also their interpretation of the corporate consumer culture of Middle America as an alienating force. The poor, lacking the financial means to participate, could be seen as further outside of the co-optive power of the

⁹⁰ Tom Kahn, "The Problem of the New Left," *Commentary* (July 1966), 35.

⁹¹ This discussion is indebted to ideas put forth in Richard J. Ellis, "Romancing the Oppressed: The New Left and the Left Out," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Winter, 1996), 109-154

⁹² Marx, of course, had dismissed the *lumpenproletariat* as “vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jail-birds, escaped galley-slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni* [beggars], pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux* [procurers], brothel-keepers, porters, *literati*, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars, in short the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass thrown hither and thither.” Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (USA: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 479.

consumer culture than the working class—an idea following the communist theory of Mao Tse-Tung, but also one implicitly caught up in the class condescension of the college-educated New Left. Believing that the soulless and overly rational consumer economy and the post-war economic boom upon which it depended were destined for a crash, the “Introductory Statement” for the ERAP project asserted that “we can expect for the future a growing army of unemployed and unemployables.”⁹³ Accepting this forecast, therefore, meant that the poor would be a more useful ally than the proletariat in a post-industrial revolution.

The valiant image of an army of the unemployed rising up against the state certainly formed an important part of the motivation behind ERAP, but members have recognized additional motivations in the years since its demise—often drawing on this ideal of the existential purity of the poor, existing outside the reach of the corrupting middle-class culture. Sharon Jeffrey, a former member of SDS, told James Miller in an interview in the mid-1980s that a variety of reasons had driven her to join an ERAP commune. Situating the project within the tradition of Maoism, she felt that “students were not radical enough,” and that a project such as this, by exposing them to the poor, would push them into a more appropriately revolutionary position. At the same time, though, “there was another part of [her], the angry part, that was excited by the idea of toppling the American society.” Lastly, Jeffrey also referenced the explicit ERAP mission of organizing and improving the lives of

⁹³ Quoted in Richard J. Ellis, “Romancing the Oppressed,” 113.

the poor as a reason for joining.⁹⁴ Jeffrey's explanations offer a useful case study for the larger importance of the consumer culture in the actuation of ERAP. As she points out, both economic guilt, expressed through a disappointment in the willingness of middle-class students to radicalize and destroy the state, and the contradictory impulse to organize and improve the economic state of the poor seemed equally valid motivations.

Warren Ellis suggests that the SDS commitment to organizing the poor "cannot be understood apart from its commitment to an egalitarian way of life and its rejection of established institutions that were structured upon principles of competitive individualism and hierarchical bureaucracy." What he fails to acknowledge, however, is that participatory democracy, while structured in opposition to the liberal state of competitive individualism, relied instead on a cooperative individualism, and not, as did the Old Left, a class-based communitarianism. Likewise, while he never explicitly makes the case that the critique of consumer culture framed this drive, he does acknowledge the "authenticity" that student activists found in the poor and outcast. To Ellis, who takes a largely negative view of the New Left, SDS required this alliance to form a balance between the ivory tower of radical theory and a more practical approach to progress. This more concrete focus on community organization, which required at least some degree of "buying into the system" in order to enact social progress from the inside, led to the risk of both burnout and co-optation. To that end, the New Left sought "an alliance with the poor and dispossessed who were outside of or marginal to established institutions" in order to "gain the power to transform established

⁹⁴ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 190.

institutions while still remaining outside of those institutions. ERAP, in short, gave [SDS] a way to act in the world without becoming corrupted by it.”⁹⁵ Ellis is correct to locate authenticity and the fear of co-optation at the heart of the New Left program, but in failing to situate this framework within a critique of the consumer culture, he misses the effect of late capitalism on their ideology.

The search for authenticity outside of mainstream mass culture also led many New Leftists into the infamous counterculture of the 1960s. These two movements, while closely related and often overlapping, nonetheless remained distinct, and writings on the period too often conflate them. That said, the growing emphasis on countercultural lifestyle elements as an act of rebellion on the part of new SDS members in the mid- to late-60s presented an important aspect for the disconnect between the old guard and the new, and likewise for the ideological splits between the younger generations themselves. Regarding the 1965 national meeting, historian James Miller wrote that “[l]ong hair was becoming common, and the sweet smell of marijuana hung in the air for the first time at an SDS convention.” Steve Max, a “red-diaper baby” likewise wrote at the time that a police raid on the convention “would have resulted in the arrest of two-thirds of the active core of the organization. If God had meant us to be anarchists we would have been born with beards.”⁹⁶ An early reference to the sectarianism that would later tear SDS apart, Max also obliquely nodded to the important influence of the counterculture on the New Left in terms of redirected expressions of consumption. Max, a devotee of the ascetic or puritan strains of the Old Left, may have

⁹⁵ Richard J. Ellis, “Romancing the Oppressed,” 114, 116.

⁹⁶ James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets*, 238.

turned his nose up at the new emphases on long hair and countercultural dress, but many of his compatriots in the old guard of SDS did not.

Viewed in this manner, the links drawing the New Left to the counterculture provide two vitally important insights into the larger relationship between SDS and the consumer culture. First, the immense profitability of countercultural items such as records and blue jeans proves the importance of alternative forms of consumption.⁹⁷ Perhaps even more important, though, was the rapid entrance and acceptance of these countercultural items into the mainstream itself. The music industry, and the continued use of the songs of the 1960s in advertising and film, provides an easily visible example of this shift. Similarly, the clothing and advertising industries, indelibly altered by the counterculture's mores, have remained obsessively fixated on the idea of "hip" to the present day. The hegemonic power of late capitalism, in other words, ensured that the purchasing power of countercultural consumers entered into and helped shaped the mainstream mass culture, allowing oppositional movements to express themselves even while generating corporate profit. As Todd Gitlin remembered in 1989, describing the woeful state of historical memory of the moment of the 1960s, "that's the way the culture works. Everything from peace symbols to the Bonnie and Clyde look were turned into fashion statements."⁹⁸

The most egregious individual example of the close relationship between consumerist

⁹⁷ At the same time, of course, student activists were involved in many of the most strenuous attempts to reject consumerism, most famously in the Digger troupe of San Francisco, but also in the ERAP projects and various other back-to-the-land and ascetic movements. That said, though, the main line of the counterculture continued to embrace an alternate form of consumption.

⁹⁸Katherine Bishop, "From the Inside Out," *New York Times*, 8 July 1989.

capitalism and the counterculture, though, has to be the evolution of Jerry Rubin. A founding member of the Youth International Party (“Yippies”), a nihilistic organization of surrealists devoted to the cultural expression of the alienation of the young, Rubin filled his 1969 memoir *Do It!* with colorful adages reminding readers that to “steal from the rich is a sacred and religious act” and that “a hip capitalist is a pig capitalist.” By 1980, however, Rubin was a New York securities analyst dedicated to “investigating new companies of the future, including those producing solar and other alternative-energy sources.” Rubin asserted that he could justify this transformation because he could “be more effective today wearing a suit and tie and working on Wall Street than I can be dancing outside the walls of power.”⁹⁹ While this about-face owed a great deal to Rubin’s self-aggrandizing character, the co-optive power of the larger mass culture and the movement’s focus on the individual certainly also eased this transition.

The fear of this kind of co-optation proved a concern even during the glory years of the New Left. Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, students and members of SDS, wrote in the introduction to their influential 1966 reader *The New Student Left* that the student’s rebellion against the system “often leads to the construction of a very personal, private, and highly individualistic world of vehement nonconformity and gratification—*Playboy Magazine* affluence for the conventional; drugs and existentialism for the bohemian.” Note here the distinction between the two stereotypes: even in failing to rebel properly, radicals could be

⁹⁹ Gerald Howard, *The Sixties*, 2-3. It is intriguing here to compare Rubin’s emphasis on a newfound respectability to be found in a suit and tie with the growth of importance given to casual dress by formerly “square” businessmen.

expected to take a different path than “the conventional,” who would be more likely to fall into a form of hyper-consumption, while the bohemian dropped out of the system altogether. Cohen and Hale pointed to this fear as one of the chief barriers to cooperation between the New Left and the adult world—including the Old Left. This was due to the fact that the “fear of distasteful alliances [with adults]-of ‘selling out’-is partly a fear that, in spite of everything, the student will eventually be co-opted by Suburbia.”¹⁰⁰ This idea of “selling out” was pivotal in the New Left’s valuation of authenticity and the mainstream consumer culture. By conflating the pursuit of monetary success—of participation within the system of their parents—with a rejection of the authenticity found both in the state of being poor and in participation in the counterculture, student activists directly predicated their radical energies around their existential angst. An accusation of “selling out” became, therefore, a damning indictment in the movement. As noted above, though, this fear of co-optation by suburbia proved a well-founded one. Not only did some former student activists quietly sink back into Suburbia after the collapse of the New Left, but despite their diligent struggle, the mass culture co-opted much of the movement’s rhetoric and imagery.

The New Right’s attack on the New Left also revolved around this relationship between the movement and the affluent society, as conservatives painted student radicals as ingrateful and hypocritical insiders who had turned their backs on the suburban ideal. The central role of the New Left in Vietnam War protests, and their auxiliary role in civil rights agitation, attracted the ire of the law-and-order “silent majority” of Americans. As SDS

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell Cohen and Dennis Hale, *The New Student Left*, xxi-xxii

increasingly drew on the thought of C. Wright Mills and emphasized the role of students and intellectuals as a potentially revolutionary “new class,” accusations of pretension and ingratititude only gained credence among their opponents. Ironically, this tendency drove many on the Old Left into surprising agreement with the New Right regarding the integrity of the movement. The issue of anti-communism, hugely problematic to the older cohort, further complicated this relationship, as much of the New Left viewed it as something of an unimportant diversion. While members of the Old Left merely engaged in doctrinaire squabbles or withdrew support from the New Left, though, the backlash from the Right escalated to violence by the close of the decade.

While the SDS convention of 1969 marked the end of that organization as a cohesive power within the New Left, events the following year signaled the death of the New Left itself and the end of the Sixties as an episode of American history. On May 4, 1970, national guardsmen opened fire on Kent State University students protesting the expansion of the Vietnam War, killing four and wounding nine. This gunfire, which most agree was unprovoked, produced among the majority of the townspeople of Kent—and a substantial number throughout the nation—not a sense of outrage, but the belief that the students had finally gotten what they deserved. Four days later, the “Hardhat Riot” in New York City similarly encapsulated the position of what President Nixon liked to refer to as the “silent majority” of Americans. That day, 200 construction workers attacked a gathering of protesters waving Viet Minh flags in front of the Stock Exchange to protest the invasion of Cambodia and memorialize the students murdered days earlier. The construction workers

injured around seventy anti-war protestors in the one-sided brawl that followed, then proceeded to force City Hall to raise its flag from half-mast, where it had been lowered to memorialize the victims of Kent State.¹⁰¹

This was the apex of the backlash against the New Left, responsible in no small part for Richard Nixon's election, and then publicly encouraged by his administration. Vice President Spiro Agnew had said in the year prior to Kent State and the Hardhat Riot that “[i]t is time for the preponderant majority, the responsible citizens of this country, to assert *their* rights. It is time to stop dignifying the immature actions of arrogant, reckless, inexperienced elements within our society... [whose] tantrums are insidiously destroying the fabric of American democracy.”¹⁰² These acts of violence, sanctioned by if not carried out by the state, combined with disillusionment and the increasingly fragmented sectarianism of the movement to bring about the end of the New Left.

After the passing of the New Left, the inchoate nature of the movement ensured that its former members would fall into a widely varied array of lifestyles and ideologies. Most famously, many entered academia, choosing a different route by which to continue their critique of society—some focusing on a kind of metanarrative examination of their experiences of the 1960s. Others entered mainstream politics, pushing either liberalized versions of their former radical concerns or embracing a critique of liberalism from the Right as fervently as they had once denounced it from the Left. In the former category, Tom

¹⁰¹ "War Foes Here Attacked By Construction Workers," *New York Times*, 9 May 1970.

¹⁰² Spiro Agnew, "Impudence in the Streets," in "*Takin' it to the streets:*" *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines,³⁵⁵

Hayden, for example, won election to the California State Senate in 1982, served a variety of functions within the Democratic Party, and most recently has focused on ending the war in Iraq and spreading information about the cause of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico.¹⁰³ David Horowitz, perhaps the most famous example of the radicals-turned-reactionaries, was never a member of SDS and a more orthodox Marxist than many of his contemporaries, but other former members have followed a pattern similar to his. Communal living and back-to-nature movements became something of a fad among many former Leftists in the Seventies, as did the embrace of a variety of new religious movements. Other former radicals continued their search for authenticity by turning to organic foods and an emphasis on communion with nature. A focus on individual growth ran throughout the vast majority of these experiences. Where the New Left represented a reaction against the consensus society through an emphasis on a community of allied individuals working toward authenticity, many of these post-Sixties activities can be viewed as a similar search for an existentially satisfying individualism, but without the emphasis on radicalizing the system.

Throughout all of these narratives, the New Left's legacy continued to operate in relation to the consumer culture in a variety of ways. Large portions of the advertising industry co-opted aspects of the counterculture, sometimes with the aid of "authentic" former Leftists. More generally, the New Left's frantic search for authenticity altered the practices of politics and culture in mainstream American society itself. The student movement led,

¹⁰³ "Tom Hayden: Biography" <http://www.tomhayden.com/biography.htm>, (accessed 26 April, 2007). The Zapatistas, it is worth noting, are perhaps the most infamous current socio-political movement devoted to an examination and reconfiguration of the modern consumer society. Although they are more oriented towards the system of globalization than SDS was, their beginnings can be found in the Mexican radical student movements of the late 1960s, and an examination of the ideological links between the two groups merits further research.

both directly and indirectly, to the rise of the importance of lifestyle in economic market segmentation and political realms. The growing class of yuppies—young urban professionals—typified this transition in the latter decades of the century. This cadre, a great many of whom had been student activists during the heyday of the New Left, engaged in levels of consumption that rivaled that of the stereotypical suburbanite of the 1950s—that bastion of “middle-class boorishness, vulgarity, and kitsch”—but focused on a “more European sensibility.”¹⁰⁴ Even while embracing the American focus on individualism, yuppies rejected the perceived parochialism of the suburbs, attempting to enact an authentic high culture by means of the objects of mass culture. Indeed, in tracing the growth of the self-involved yuppie culture among Boomers, the view of the suburban lifestyle as something of a trap that surfaced repeatedly in the writings of the New Left becomes rather prescient.

Recall here Cohen and Hale's warning regarding co-optation in 1966, wherein the students' rebellion could easily lead to a highly individualized nonconformist gratification focused on either affluence or existentialism. Apparently correct about the tendency to drift toward personal gratification, the two activists appear merely to have misjudged the degree of difference between “conventional” and “bohemian.” Thus, the “contemptuous rebukes” of yuppies that Lyons cites—“You don't even have the courage of your old convictions,’ or ‘You've sold out,”—lead naturally to his rather despondent conclusion: “Those who once had hopes for social justice are held in contempt; those who have always been self-interested and

¹⁰⁴ Paul Lyons, *New Left, New Right, and the Legacy of the Sixties*, 164. Lyons' chapter “Yuppie: A Contemporary American Keyword,” provides a fascinating analysis of the common perception of the yuppie phenomenon and its place in the post-Sixties political and cultural landscape of America.

oblivious to those in pain are let off the hook.”¹⁰⁵ This view relies, yet again, on the American insistence on consensus liberalism as the only rational and non-ideological mindset, rendering involvement with any other form of ideology immediately suspect.

The growth of yuppies among the former SDS cadre, both as an actual phenomenon and as a mythic construction, provides a useful stereotype for the discussion of the New Left and consumerism. Just as the student activists of the 1960s had relied so heavily on the stereotypical suburbanite to support their critique of the unfulfilling modern lifestyle, this archetype stands in turn as a continuing emblem of the pervasive power of the consumer culture. Many on the Right, including the ex-movement members among their ranks, have pointed to this as an example of the hypocrisy and corruption nascent in such an individualized Left. As historian Paul Lyons wrote: “Yuppie bashing... is the attempt to portray the social movements associated with the 1960s as anything from nihilistic to foolish, but in any case now passé, merely nostalgic.” This dismissal of the activism of the era relies heavily both on a trivialization of the youthful nature of the New Left, and the typical American view of ideology or political “extremism” as a mistake, a problem of the Old and Third Worlds and unnecessary in the consensus society of the United States. This, in Lyons’s view, separated the former activist yuppies from their “fellow affluents in the corporate sectors,” as “they once had utopian visions, once assaulted old-fashioned values and behaviors.” Conservatives, by suggesting that “a social conscience usually masks self-interest, opportunism, guilt, trendiness, or some combination thereof” and that “affluence

¹⁰⁵ Paul Lyons, *New Left, New Right, and the Legacy of the Sixties*, 171, 172, and 175.

inherently mandates conventional business values and legitimate self-interest,” had “ingeniously diverted villainy from actual centers of power—the multinationals and Wall Street—to arenas of mere status and life-style, Yuppie Heaven.”

Jerry Rubin’s post-Sixties actions seem to fit uncomfortably well with the conservative accusations of self-interest and opportunism. As he said himself, where he had once “scorned money,” his new “real and honest” approach to marketing would “create an economic transformation in the 1990s as profound as the social changes that took place in America in the 1960s.” Rubin, indeed, became something of a caricature of this stereotype of the radical-turned-yuppie, and, utterly unapologetic about his transformation, provides a goldmine of quips about this phenomenon. For example, when asked about his ideal life, Rubin said that “I want to grow, to be rich. I enjoy being healthy. I’m not interested in experiencing ups and downs anymore. I want a moderate level of experience. Those aren’t the statements of an ambitious person.” When the interviewer pointed out that Rubin seemed to be saying that he wanted “a middle-class life-style like most Americans,” Rubin replied that “[t]hat statement would have horrified me in the sixties, but I have to be honest about myself.” Driven to a rant about contradiction by a question about his popularization in the Sixties of the catchphrase “Don’t trust anyone over thirty,” Rubin asked rhetorically “How can a revolutionary who wants to change the world eat junk food?” Activists who were “against corporations because they are poisoning the environment... because they dominate Latin America” but who then “go into a restaurant and eat corporate food and think nothing of it,” were, to Rubin, missing “the first responsibility of a revolutionary... to live a long life

and to be healthy while you live a long life.”¹⁰⁶ One would be hard-pressed to find a more apt encapsulation of the highly individualized focus on self-actualization within an unchanging system that characterized the viewpoints of some ex-radicals.

Regarding Rubin's mention of the “social changes” brought about by the Sixties, it is useful to return here to Tom Kahn's 1966 “The Problem of the New Left.” Written from an Old Left stance insisting on the revolutionary necessity of labor unions, this article made a number of eerily prescient claims about the New Left. Kahn argued that the New Left “will not in fact make history, but rather that it will turn out to be a symptom of history, a fleeting moment in which radical ‘energies’ were released into the larger society.” Most importantly, “largely through use of direct-action techniques borrowed from the civil-rights movement” SDS had “focused attention on problems and contradictions in American society” even while lacking “the political power to solve them.”¹⁰⁷ If Kahn overstates his point, particularly given the tumultuous events at the end of the decade and the role of the New Left in the rise of Nixon and Reagan, it remains an intriguing assertion nonetheless. While Kahn does not explicitly define these “radical energies,” his broader argument reflects the shift of countercultural lifestyle habits from the movement to the mainstream, as various industries co-opted countercultural mores and incorporated them into practices of advertising and consumption.

Kahn's assertion that the New Left had been more effective at drawing attention to societal problems than at actually fixing them also prefigures much of the retrospective

¹⁰⁶ Ron Chepesiuk. *Sixties Radicals, Then and Now: Candid Conversations with Those Who Shaped the Era* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1995), 183, 189, and 192.

¹⁰⁷ Tom Kahn, “The Problem of the New Left,” 30 and 33.

discussion on the New Left, including the emphasis on lifestyle born during the movement and predominant after it. Todd Gitlin, in his memoir *The Sixties*, pointed primarily to the expanded opportunities for women and racial minorities, the new-found realization that “we live on a single, interlocked, fragile planet,” and the success of the anti-war movement as the era’s most positive legacies. All of these could certainly be assessed as instances of the movement drawing attention to societal problems while lacking the ability—due to their emphasis on working outside the liberal system and the rejection of much of their politics by middle America—to solve them on their own.¹⁰⁸ Richard Flacks similarly suggested in 1974 that the turn of former activists toward grassroots local politics and personal actualization found expression not only in the environmental and women’s movements, but also in Boomers’ retention of ideals developed in the New Left even in their professional careers.¹⁰⁹ Once again, with the dissolution of the New Left, many members progressed to movements that focused on more individualized expression and had a more widespread mainstream appeal.

This transition into the mainstream, while certainly not true of all New Leftists, helps to illustrate the hegemonic power of suburbia and the mass culture of the market as systems of late capitalism. Indeed, suburbia occupied a problematic relationship with both the New Left and the New Right. The latter viewed suburbanites in a much more gracious light than did the former, sometimes to the point of idealizing their kinship with a traditional agrarian community, outside of the implicitly racial problems of the cities. At the same time, portions

¹⁰⁸ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties*, xi.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Flacks, “Making History vs. Making Life,” in *Toward a History of the New Left*, ed. R. David Myers, 150.

of the New Right held a similarly negative view of the consumer culture, although predicated less around a criticism of capitalism than the “soullessness” of modern materialism. Others, of course, simply celebrated consumerism as the day-to-day expression of the all-powerful free market. Suburbia, therefore, presented something of a floating signifier for the 1960s. For consensus liberals, it was proof of America’s greatness, a classless mass of affluence beyond the reach of ideology. For the New Right, it became the seat of their power and a move away from modern urbanism back toward an ideal of Jeffersonian families. For the New Left, suburbia represented simultaneously the birthplace and terrifyingly final resting place for many student activists, the symbol of their critique of inauthenticity, and the aspirations of many of those they sought to organize. This fluidity speaks powerfully for the political role of suburbia in modern America, particularly when viewed as a physical manifestation of the landscape of consumption.

The nuances of the New Left’s relation to the consumer culture also presents new considerations in the history of the Left in America. SDS and the larger student movement, rather than escaping or circumventing this culture, succeeded only in navigating through it. Combined with the pervasive effect of the consumer culture on the actions and ideologies of the New Left, this provides an important new consideration in the historical question of the failure of American socialism. The New Left, by far the largest expression of American radicalism and cultural discontent in the second half of the twentieth century, occupied a two-way relationship with suburbia and the consumer culture. While some of the New Left—in terms of both culture/ideology and population—was absorbed back into the mass culture

that they initially sought to reject, others retained their vision of a utopian alternative, be it a new understanding of spatial organization, or family structure, or a continuing societal critique within academia, for example. Suburbia and the consumer culture, clearly, occupy places of the utmost power in the post-industrial landscape of the nation, particularly given their permissive and hegemonic relationship to countercultures. This fact, while not explaining the failure of Marxism to take hold during the heyday of the industrial proletariat, helps us to understand both the benefits and the downfalls of the post-Sixties shift to identity politics.

SDS, throughout its existence, wrestled with the relation of communitarianism and individualism, struggling through its rejection of the class-based labor metaphysic into a growing emphasis on personalized politics. Following this same trajectory, the vestiges of the New Left often effectively continued this shift into an acceptance of the continuing power of the consumer culture with an emphasis on groups predicated around individualized identity politics. This is the most important innovation of the Left working within late capitalism: enacting progressive change by accepting the hegemony of the mainstream while simultaneously asserting the power of the individual acting in concert with those of a similar mindset. As William Appleman Williams, the radical historian and precursor to the New Left, wrote in 1966, “[t]he great virtue of revolutions is that they create the circumstances in which a society’s problems *can* be solved.”¹¹⁰ This is how the New Left, in concert with other movements of the post-war years, achieved its most notable successes: the anti-war

¹¹⁰ William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966), 51. Emphasis his.

movement, the feminist movement, the push for civil rights. These, and similar areas, were ones in which the Left successfully associated its societal critique not with an attack upon middle-class values, but with a valuation of the rights of the individual with which the middle class would not only agree, but find worth the struggle.

CHAPTER II

“Black is Beautiful But So is Green:” Capitalism, Black Power, and Politics in Floyd McKissick’s Soul City

In the tumultuous summer of 1968, Floyd McKissick, National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), announced his retirement from that organization to devote his time to the development of the “Black Economy,” the growth of which he viewed as “the spearhead of racial equality.”¹¹¹ On January 13, 1969, McKissick unveiled what would constitute the flagship of his efforts: a new planned community in Warren County, North Carolina. McKissick intended for this project, which he named Soul City, to provide a real-world example of his ideal of black economic power. In attempting to enlist support for the project among a number of disparate groups, McKissick co-opted a wide variety of sometimes-contradictory ideals. Because of this, Soul City was supposed to simultaneously embody an individualistic capitalist ideal—with the attendant emphases on the free market and self-help—and a centrally planned communitarian utopia. As an African-American utopia, Soul City presented a way for McKissick’s followers to rely on both the community orientation of the Civil Rights Movement and the self-help discourse of black power—all while working within the capitalist system, but without giving way entirely to assimilation. By channeling the American ideal of rugged individualism into a self-made community, in other words, the project would help solve the racial problems of the country. In keeping with

¹¹¹ Soul City Company, “Soul City: A Fresh Start,” undated, box 10, folder 146, Soul City Papers, Chapin F. Stuart, Jr. Planning Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Soul City Papers).

this image, McKissick insisted that the population would possess a harmonious multiracial character, while black capitalists would lead the development project and the town itself.

Despite—or perhaps because of—these contradictions, McKissick’s rhetoric surrounding Soul City deftly illustrated the interplay between race, class, politics, and economics throughout the period following the end of the “classic Civil Rights Movement.” The Soul City project, in this view, encapsulated the expression of an African-American middle class self-help discourse articulated within a capitalist framework. McKissick, moreover, proved a master of American politics, combining the “politics of respectability” and assimilationist goals of the Civil Rights Movement with the autonomous ideology of Black Power, particularly the focus on black-owned businesses and economic power, but without any accompanying Black Nationalism or separatism. Combining the resulting rhetoric with traditional political maneuvering, McKissick switched his registration from the Democratic to the ascendant Republican Party in 1972, a highly unusual political alliance for an African American at the time. Simultaneously, McKissick presented Soul City as an answer to the economic problems of both the rural South and the urban ghettos of the North. He intended to accomplish this by luring industry to new communities in the South—modeled after Soul City—which would, in turn, entice those African Americans who had migrated North and thereafter been left behind in the “white flight” epidemic to return to a newly-revitalized South.

McKissick’s rhetoric surrounding the Soul City project masterfully combined the discourses of the “classic” Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, planned suburban

communities, and the capitalist self-help schema of the American Dream. In the context of the rising New Right, McKissick chose to cast his lot with the GOP, deciding that a pact with the party in charge of the federal budget would be more useful than the traditional civil rights alliance with the Democrats. This tactic made sense because of the more visible emphasis on economic justice in civil rights discourse, combined with McKissick's ideological devotion to black capitalism. This utilitarian shift, in concert with McKissick's use of both pragmatic individualism and utopian communitarianism, colorfully illustrates the conflicted space of middle-class radicalism in late capitalist America.

For all of McKissick's rhetorical skill in selling his community, however, Soul City never developed or attracted the industrial base it required to function economically, and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) foreclosed on its loans in 1979, withdrawing its support much earlier than McKissick had expected. Both the local press and conservative North Carolina politicians remained consistently hostile to the project, accusing McKissick of everything from financial mismanagement to nepotism to reverse racism. After McKissick's death in 1991, his obituary in the *New York Times* reported that Soul City had proven to be an "economically unviable" project that, by "mid-1979... housed only 135 people, all but 30 of them black, and half of them living in mobile homes." An insufficient outcome, in the eyes of the *Times*, and a failure even "in spite of \$19 million in Federal aid and \$8 million more from state and local sources."¹¹² McKissick and Soul City, the newspaper implied, deserved to be remembered not for their dreams or meager successes,

¹¹² Glenn Fowler, "Floyd McKissick, Civil Rights Maverick, Dies at 69," *New York Times*, 30 April 1991.

but for their failures. The subtext here is that McKissick's own lifelong narrative remained inextricably linked with the story of Soul City, and served as a fitting reference to the stress between the individual and the community within the project.

Floyd Bixler McKissick was born in Asheville, North Carolina, on March 9, 1922. Press materials written later in his life retroactively assert that he grew up practicing economic self-sufficiency from a very early age, always managing "to find some source of income from enterprising self-employment. He was a shoe shine boy, waiter, bus boy, yard man, cleaner and errand boy."¹¹³ After his proto-capitalist youth, McKissick interrupted his enrollment at Morehouse University for a stint in the military during World War II. Before being sent to Europe for a tour of duty, McKissick married Evelyn Williams, with whom he would have four children. In 1951, McKissick sued the University of North Carolina for admittance to law school at Chapel Hill, and became the first black man to enroll in the program. After his graduation, he opened a law office on the Main Street of Durham, North Carolina, an area previously exclusive to white-owned businesses. During his career as a lawyer, he represented civil rights activists facing prosecution for integrating lunch counters, sued to have his own four children admitted to all-white schools, and served as the legal counsel for CORE.

¹¹³ "Biographical Notes on Floyd B. McKissick," 3 October 1968, box 341, folder 7537, Floyd B. McKissick Papers #4930, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter McKissick Papers). One newspaper article, presumably drawing upon this same biographical one-sheet, imaginatively wrote that McKissick "hustled his way through youth in Asheville, North Carolina, shining shoes, selling fish and bellhopping, and into law school as the University of North Carolina's first Black student." McKissick's self-constructed personal narrative clearly emphasized from the beginning his reliance on self-help and the market.

In 1966, McKissick succeeded James Farmer as CORE's National Director. Under McKissick's leadership, the organization developed "a six-point program for Black Power and Self Determination," beginning with "Economic Power" and culminating with "Mobilization of Black Consumers."¹¹⁴ Clearly, McKissick's emphasis on financial autonomy for African Americans predated the founding of Soul City by a number of years. After McKissick had served as CORE's National Director for two years, he resigned in order to focus exclusively on building economic power for African Americans. Initially, this drive toward a "Black Economy" took place under the auspices of Floyd B. McKissick Enterprises, Inc., which worked "to help organize and finance substantial Black business across the nation," but it found its ultimate expression in Soul City. As McKissick explained to a newspaper in 1976, "[t]he real Floyd McKissick never got a chance to step forward during the Civil Rights Movement," as his activism during those years had "sidetracked his penchant for commercial enterprises."¹¹⁵ Just as his press materials had earlier called attention to McKissick's long-standing devotion to individual endeavors within the free market, McKissick now retroactively characterized his entire involvement with the Civil Rights Movement as a distraction from his life-long love of the market. Soul City allowed him to speak to both of these impulses, by combining socio-economic justice and the entrepreneurial spirit. McKissick's ability to sell himself by means of carefully constructed narratives of this sort greatly aided his politicking in support of Soul City.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Industrial Management Association of Greater Pensacola, "Floyd McKissick – January Program Speaker", *Pensacola Helmsman*, January 1976, box 343, folder 7494, McKissick Papers.

Soul City itself formed a concrete symbol of McKissick's ideals writ large, a physical and ideological structure to house the communitarian and capitalist ideas that he had been cultivating throughout his life—at least according to his public relations materials. Combining the self-reliant communitarian focus of Black Power—without the hostility to the liberal American political system—with the free market ideology of capitalism, McKissick and his associates presented Soul City as either the beginning of an independent Black Economy or a model for a newly utopian interracial community, depending on who was listening. In either vision, the project aimed to correct an impressively wide variety of socio-economic problems. Never one for modest goals, McKissick intended Soul City as merely the first of many such communities, which would spread throughout the nation, uplifting African Americans and humanizing—or at least humbling—the white power structure. In a truly utopian fashion, McKissick's expansive vision would not only make right the personal lives of Soul City residents, but also refashion the entire American political realm into a more benevolent edifice.

Congress passed the New Communities Act in order to develop “a national urban growth policy” that would encourage the “rational, orderly, efficient and economic growth, development and redevelopment” of both rural and urban areas that demonstrated a “special potential for accelerated growth.” Such development would “assure our communities of adequate tax bases, community services, job opportunities, and well-balanced neighborhoods in socially, economically and physically attractive living environments.”¹¹⁶ To aid in this

¹¹⁶“Statement by Floyd McKissick, Sr.” Press Conference 20 March 1975, box 343, folder 7479, McKissick Papers.

process, HUD would subsidize the new communities by underwriting bonds for their development. While the New Communities Assistance Programs created by this legislation had no explicit link to the question of race in America, Floyd McKissick quickly grasped the ramifications for poor blacks throughout the nation.

McKissick first made his plans for a new community in North Carolina explicit on January 13, 1969, in a press conference in the office of Orville Freeman, then the Federal Secretary of Agriculture.¹¹⁷ Here, McKissick explained that he had long discussed the application of “New City technology” to the problems of racial minorities and the poor, and had been “among the first to advocate construction of entirely new communities as an alternative to urban ghettos and rural decay.” McKissick envisioned his new town, not yet called “Soul City,” as “a totally planned community, utilizing the latest knowledge in the field of city planning to create a harmonious environment and productive working conditions.” By locating the community in Warren County, McKissick ensured that the new town would be within “the so-called ‘Black Belt’ of the South,” allowing its residents to work toward the “development of black urban technological skills.” Warren County’s rural character, moreover, would allow the Soul City project to pursue the “revitalization of a rural agricultural area to demonstrate that good jobs, quality education and cultural enhancement can be created in decaying rural areas.” Last, McKissick insisted that the example of Soul City could later be used to inspire similar ventures by impoverished minority groups

¹¹⁷ The Soul City Foundation, *Soul City: History of A Free Standing New Community* (North Carolina: The Soul City Foundation, 1975), 3.

throughout the nation.¹¹⁸ Intriguingly, this plan calls to mind the monolithic national culture of late capitalist suburbia—what could work in one region of the nation, in this case the Black Belt of the South, could, in McKissick’s thought, be easily replicated elsewhere.

With these lofty aims articulated, McKissick and his associates applied to HUD for the necessary development loans the following year. This began a lengthy series of applications, reviews, and revisions, leading up to a final appeal for a \$10 million guaranteed loan in February 1971, which HUD did not approve until June 1972. The final revisions, authored by an “independent consultant” working for HUD, increased the amount of the guarantee to \$14 million, and stated that if “Soul City achieved only 2/3 of its goals, the project would be financially and programmatically successful.”¹¹⁹ With the application itself approved, it took the Soul City Company and HUD another two years to work out a feasible Project Agreement, with the government issuing the first federally backed bonds in March 1974.¹²⁰

By 1975, Warren County had a population of 15,180, of which African Americans constituted about two-thirds. Demographically, it provided an ideal location for the project, which the first issue of the *Soul City Newsletter* identified as “a new community dedicated to providing economic and social opportunities for Black people [and] given to the philosophy that Black people can and should exercise [sic] some control over their own destinies.” Not that Soul City would be racially exclusive, the *Newsletter* hastened to add: this was a

¹¹⁸ Von Blaine, McKissick & Associates, Inc. “McKissick Enterprises to Build New Town” 13 January 1969, folder 141, Soul City Papers.

¹¹⁹ The Soul City Foundation, *Soul City*, 4.

¹²⁰Ibid., 5.

community “open to all people of good will.” The community’s architects, with the aid of the University of North Carolina’s Planning Department, had designed the town as “a self-reliant city [offering] facilities for shopping, recreation, housing, and a sound, diversified economic base.”¹²¹ McKissick and his fellow planners intended for the population of Soul City to grow to “some 50,000 people” before the end of the century. The initial thirty-year plan called for the development of 5,287 acres “to create an urban setting in a rural environment to attract a population from both rural and urban areas.” In an era when the unemployment rate in Warren County reached upwards of thirty percent, the Soul City Company gave “industry first priority in development” as the project could not depend on “an established industrial... base.”¹²² Creating its own employment pool through industrial development, Soul City would provide the ideal location for and example of black capitalism. Moreover, by developing new structures rather than improving an older city, McKissick also used Soul City to co-opt the booming rhetoric of planned suburban communities, and simultaneously positioned the community to speak to both urban and rural concerns.

McKissick and his associates set up a rather labyrinthine conglomerate of organizations to develop and run Soul City. Floyd B. McKissick Enterprises, Inc., the company that McKissick had worked through for years to develop black-owned businesses, was the “sponsor” of the endeavor. The Soul City Company oversaw the development of Soul City itself, while the Soul City Foundation, Inc. bore the responsibility for its “social planning.”

¹²¹ Warren Regional Planning Corporation, *Soul City Newsletter*, March 1971, box 10, folder 142, Soul City Papers.

¹²² “Basic Fact Sheet on Soul City, North Carolina,” Promotional Material for Press Conference March 30, 1975, box 10, folder 143, Soul City Papers.

Soul City's organizational umbrella also contained the Warren Regional Planning Corporation, which aimed to create and sustain minority businesses nearby, and The Soul City Investment Corporation, to raise funds and implement capital projects. HealthCo, Inc., as its name suggests, would offer health care not only to future residents of Soul City but to those in Warren and Vance Counties as well. The Soul City Sanitary District, the first local government body voted into office, provided public services and had the power to "levy taxes and issue bonds to support those utilities." Finally, the planners established the non-profit Soul City Utilities Company to build a sewage system and treatment facility.¹²³ This arrangement, while seemingly cumbersome, was necessary because of Soul City's isolated location, far from any previously existing infrastructure.

While McKissick located Soul City in a rural area, intending to develop it into a free-standing urban center, the town nonetheless possessed many of the characteristics of a suburban development. Historian Kenneth Jackson, in his seminal 1985 work *Crabgrass Frontier*, identified the prime similarities in American suburban developments, wherein middle-class Americans owned their own homes, complete with relatively substantial yards and located far from their places of work.¹²⁴ While McKissick certainly intended Soul City to attract middle class residents, he also designed the community to involve a large proportion of working class residents, whose standard of living would be improved through their residence and participation in the project.¹²⁵ Part of his idea of black capitalism involved a

¹²³ Ibid. Vance County is to the immediate west of Warren.

¹²⁴ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 6.

¹²⁵ This idea of working-class suburbs was not one limited to Soul City. See, for example, Becky Nicolaides'

form of “sweat equity,” whereby a family’s labor would be applied toward the cost of their home. Community, in Soul City, would benefit from capitalist business interests, but individuals lacking wealth would simultaneously benefit from the communal structure of the project. Similarly, Soul City’s land-use zones and emphasis on maintaining a connection with nature through a park system, in addition to its overall planned character, were undeniably suburban in character. Soul City, then, represented a co-optation of the trend of “spatial restructuring by race,” the newly dominant form of segregation created by the white urban diaspora and the monopolization of skill, jobs, and capital in the white suburban enclaves.¹²⁶ McKissick designed Soul City, in contrast, to grasp such geographic mobility and spatial restructuring on behalf of African Americans. Unfortunately, as with the majority of McKissick’s goals, Soul City’s sweat equity never got off the ground, and his projected dream of widespread homeownership never materialized.

Soul City’s planned and controlled environment would allow for the creation of a community combining the characteristics of both suburbs and traditional cities, with well-demarcated zones of activity contained within the town. Planners allotted Soul City’s land-use as 30 percent housing, “18 per cent for industry, 5 per cent for commercial development, 11 per cent for institutional use (including education), and 28 per cent for community parks and natural open spaces.” After the end of thirty years of development, the planners envisioned a city comprised of eight villages, each housing approximately 6,000 residents.

My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

¹²⁶ Thomas J. Sugrue, “The Structures of Urban Poverty: The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History,” in *The “Underclass” Debate: Views From History*, ed. Michael Katz (USA: Princeton University Press, 1992), 100.

Housing within these villages would be a mix of detached single-family homes, apartments, and townhouses, all grouped near community activity centers. An “Industrial Park” in the north, accessible to the “major transportation corridors” of the region, would be its “major employment center.” At the center of the town would sit the “Soul City Plaza… designed as a major regional shopping, office, government, and entertainment complex.” For a school system, each of these villages would include an elementary school, augmented by an Educational Park, located on the southern end of the main road, offering schooling from junior high all the way to university courses.¹²⁷ Soul City, clearly, would present a stark contrast to the overcrowded spaces and lack of opportunity of the nation’s urban poor.

Even more directly appropriating the discourse of suburban planning, Soul City’s organizers also emphasized the community’s garden-like connection with nature. In addition to roads and pedestrian walkways, a “Bikepath system” would connect the “major activity points” within Soul City. Furthermore, around 1,500 of Soul City’s 5,000 acres were initially reserved for “recreational and open space use.” 900 of these acres, “characterized by heavy tree cover and stream valleys and 120 acres of man-made lakes” would be set aside as “permanent natural forest and wildlife areas,” while the rest would be devoted to a municipal park system.¹²⁸ This provided one of the benefits of Soul City’s isolated location, as the proximity of a metropolitan center would greatly complicate the creation of a park and the emphasis on the community’s proximity to nature. Soul City’s isolated location made it unique among the fourteen New Towns created under the Urban Growth and New

¹²⁷ “Basic Fact Sheet on Soul City, North Carolina.”

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Communities Act of 1968: it was the only one not developed as a satellite to a previously extant city.¹²⁹ This, in addition to locating the project in an area surrounded by less expensive land, allowed McKissick to reference the area's rural character as a more authentic alternative to other suburbs, an oblique reference to the artificiality of the urban landscape.

Along with its freestanding location, Soul City's black leadership stood alone among the New Communities of 1968. As McKissick reminded people, he oversaw "the largest and most innovative project ever undertaken by a minority-owned developer" at the time.¹³⁰ By combining a quest for economic justice with a devotion to the capitalist free market, Soul City offered the perfect way to co-opt the "white economic system" for the betterment of African Americans. As McKissick remarked in 1978, "[b]lack is beautiful but so is green and if blacks are going to develop green power, they have got to become part of the economic free market system. We are not going to develop economic power from the outside in. We are going to get economic power by moving inside the economic system and earning our piece of the action." Soul City, therefore, represented nothing less than "an opportunity for all aspects of the free enterprise system to prove its worth—to prove it internally to all persons who believe in that system by example. Soul City is an example of what our forefathers meant America to be."¹³¹ McKissick used the old civil rights tactic of pointing to the contradictions between American racial politics and the founding ideals of the American dream, but he turned it into a much more aggressive stratagem than it had been in the past.

¹²⁹ The Soul City Foundation, *Soul City*, 2.

¹³⁰ "Basic Fact Sheet on Soul City, North Carolina," Promotional Material for Press Conference 30 March 1975, box 10, folder 143, in Soul City Papers.

¹³¹ Floyd McKissick, "The Economics of Being Black," Address to Standard Oil Company of Indiana Senior Management Meeting, 23 June 1978, box 343, folder 7481b, McKissick Papers.

By linking Soul City with both racial equality and the democratic free market, McKissick positioned his project as not merely a good business plan, but also a downright patriotic proposition. This narrative relied heavily on the traditional American utopia: what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “American Assumption,” that any individual, no matter his or her economic standing, could, by means of thrift and hard work, join the upper classes of the economic elite.¹³²

Despite the claims of detractors to the contrary, McKissick and Soul City proponents positioned themselves on the side of democracy and the American way, not with Black Power revolutionaries. Furthermore, Soul City represented “the basic aspirations of black Americans who believe in constitutional government and who seek to be involved in promoting the free enterprise system by lawful means. These are the people that should be supported rather than those who seek to overthrow the government.”¹³³ By the Nixon era, as historian Dan Carter has observed, “fears of blackness and fears of disorder” formed the “warp and woof of the social agenda,” with many white Americans connecting “blackness and criminality, blackness and poverty, blackness and cultural degradation.”¹³⁴ Thus, the ever astute McKissick subverted his opponents’ rhetoric: rather than the dominant political discourse, wherein nods to “law and order” signified white America’s fear of African Americans and Black Power, McKissick pointed to Soul City’s “lawful” nature as a new alternative to the problem of race.

¹³² W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 182-183.

¹³³ Floyd McKissick, “The Economics of Being Black.”

¹³⁴ Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), ⁴².

Both McKissick and the Black Power ideologues, then, offered utopian alternatives to the current dystopia of the African American urban “underclass.” McKissick, as usual, demonstrated his adept understanding of shifting political winds by emphasizing what he knew had become a matter of great concern to the Nixon administration. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Nixon adviser on urban affairs, wrote to the president in 1970 that this class “terrorizes and plunders the stable elements of the Negro community—trapped by white prejudice in the slums, and forced to live cheek by jowl with a murderous slum population.” The solution, then, was to transform the urban lower class “into a stable working class population,” after which the “cultural revolution” of the black petite bourgeoisie would become “an exciting and constructive development.”¹³⁵ If groups like the Black Panthers called this “internal colonization,” McKissick offered Soul City as an ideal utopian solution, a homegrown American alternative to more radical solutions.

In addition to presenting his community as the Black Capitalist American alternative to Black Nationalism, McKissick co-opted the dominant narrative of American suburbanization by emphasizing Soul City’s potential attraction for migrants—both those looking to escape the problems of the urban North and those fleeing the rural South. As the first *Soul City Newsletter* put it, “Soul City also hopes to find new solutions to the problems of over-crowded cities and the frustrations of the ghetto by stemming the out-migration of young people to the existing urban/industrial areas—and, hopefully, encourage some who have left

¹³⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “What Has Been Pulling Us Apart?” in *The New American Revolution*, ed. Roderick Aya and Norman Miller (New York: The Free Press), 11.

to return.”¹³⁶ To McKissick and his associates, a reinvigorated black presence in the South represented the best way to fight the blight caused by “white flight” away from urban centers. Rather than attempt to fight a losing battle to revitalize the urban centers of the North, Soul City would create a new black economy in the traditional Southern Black Belt—and provide a model for elsewhere. Even before taking white suburbanization into account, McKissick observed that “[w]e are losing people and these people are untrained when they go to the city and there is no place for them, so, if we are really talking about solving the problems of the cities and trying to solve the problems of the minorities who go to the cities and fight the problems of race, then you have to start at the roots of the problems.”¹³⁷ White flight further compounded such problems by ravishing the urban tax base. Moreover, by attracting a large industrial base, Soul City would help shift the majority of the rural black Southern population from an agriculturally based workforce to one more strongly oriented toward industry.

Even the region’s traditional reliance on agriculture, in large part responsible for its economically disastrous state, could become a positive attribute in McKissick’s rhetoric. In 1974, McKissick wrote a letter to John Lamb, President of the Minneapolis Marketing Corporation, in which he insisted “[t]he ‘New South’ has certain basic advantages which other regions do not presently have” to attract industrial development. His list included an “adequate supply of labor... manpower programs to assist in training... [and] lower wages since the unions have not found it feasible to conduct their activities here.” In other words, the lack of industrial development in the past, combined with the “right to work” laws of the

¹³⁶ *Soul City Newsletter*, March 1971, Soul City Papers.

¹³⁷ Soul City Corporation, “Present at the Creation,” Souvenir Book, 9 November 1973, box 10, folder 145, Soul City Papers.

Southern states, left the potential proletariat in the South unprepared to bargain wisely for it now, and the workforce remained desperate enough to refuse union interference. Choosing Soul City as a location for industrial development, McKissick insisted, would equal “good, sound economics.”¹³⁸ Even while working toward an avowedly middle-class community, McKissick recognized the necessity of industry to community development. His union bashing supported his goal of leading southern blacks out of the ranks of the working poor and into the middle class. There, they would require the guiding hand not of unions, but of the free market.

By presenting Soul City as the answer to both individualized and class-based issues confronting the nation at the close of the 1960s, McKissick tapped into much the same sentiment as did Richard Nixon in his 1968 bid for the presidency. Popular understandings of the dystopia of the inner city—commonly if not entirely accurately understood to be African American—involved some of the same confusion between individual and community as did Soul City itself. As historian Michael B. Katz has noted, poverty and the underclass in the United States has long involved a debate about “the extent to which individuals are responsible for their own poverty” in terms of “the balance between individual agency and structural forces.”¹³⁹ Nixon’s silent majority, of course, sided firmly with the former view, as befitting the forces of conservatism, with their unyielding emphasis on the individual. To them, the underclass consisted of drug dealers and welfare queens, individuals who had made

¹³⁸ McKissick to John Lamb, President Minneapolis Marketing Corporation, 9 May 1974, box 1, folder 20, McKissick Papers.

¹³⁹ Michael B. Katz, “The Urban ‘Underclass’ as a Metaphor of Social Transformation,” in *The “Underclass” Debate: Views From History*, ed. Michael Katz (USA: Princeton University Press), 5.

their choices to reject law and order and exist parasitically within the American system.

Floyd McKissick understood the issues differently, but attempted to use the political power of the New Right to fix that same system, while aiding the members of the “underclass.”¹⁴⁰

The latter half of the twentieth century, indeed, represented a sea change in the spatial structure of poverty in the United States. Thomas J. Sugrue suggests that the combination of declining industry, suburbanization, and racism in the years after World War II created “a new form of concentrated poverty, largely restricted to deteriorating inner center cities, which has replaced the episodic and spatially diffuse poverty” of the past.¹⁴¹ Soul City, then, represented a novel solution to a new form of an old problem. From the dystopia of the day-to-day existence of poor urban African Americans living within a racist system, McKissick forged Soul City as both utopian means *and* end. In terms of spatial separation and isolation, utopian suburbia and dystopian downtowns provided distorted mirror images of one another, much as Soul City simultaneously mirrored the American focus on individualism and the radical insistence on communitarianism.¹⁴² Where many “local black empowerment activists” had called for “collective means” by which to “strengthen the black community institutionally” in lieu of public policies that improved “individual black mobility within the American economic system,” McKissick sought to harness the latter to promote the former.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ As Katz also notes, this is a largely problematic term, revolving around stigmatization and not actually defining a “class” as such. See *The “Underclass” Debate*, 16-23.

¹⁴¹ Thomas J. Sugrue, “The Structures of Urban Poverty: The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History,” in Katz, *The “Underclass” Debate*, 116.

¹⁴² Recall Jackson’s definitive principles of suburbia, and see Katz, 18.

¹⁴³ Thomas F. Jackson, “The State, the Movement, and the Urban Poor: The War on Poverty and Political

By co-opting elements of the disparate ideologies of civil rights, Black Power, suburbia, and capitalist self-help, McKissick fashioned an ideal image of Soul City to appeal to a large variety of social groups and potential backers. He set the stage by latching onto the popular disillusionment with the 1960s, proclaiming that the passé spirit of that decade, full of protest and revolution, had to give way to a more utilitarian ideal in the 1970s. In this manner, he appealed not only to African Americans seeking a new direction for the Civil Rights Movement, but also to Black Power advocates, the “Silent Majority” of Nixon followers, and social pragmatists. The *Kansas City Times*, reporting on a 1975 “Black Leadership Conference” speech of McKissick’s, quoted him as saying “[i]n the 1960s blacks and other minorities demonstrated for principles...But the 1970s are a time for economic battles... Somehow or another we’ve always been told there’s something wrong with money. There ain’t nothing wrong with money.” Rather than offending the mainstream through protests, McKissick suggested, “Blacks and other minorities must now learn how to use the system—a system that revolves around politics and economics.”¹⁴⁴ The system, he insinuated, simply *owed* those African Americans who relied on the lawful American dream rather than rebellion to better their place in life—and what better way to reward them than to help finance Soul City?

This realist message of the interconnectivity of politics and economics resonated throughout McKissick’s thought, and proved one of the few ideas that he consistently expressed no matter what the composition of his audience. Likewise, where the mainstream

Mobilization in the 1960s,” in Katz, *The “Underclass” Debate*, 406.

¹⁴⁴ John Dvorak, “Money: Rx for Blacks,” *Kansas City Times*, 23 August 1975, box 341, folder 7548, McKissick Papers.

media emphasized the animosity between the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, McKissick situated Soul City firmly at the intersection of these two tendencies. Conversely, McKissick sometimes tapped into the mainstream's association of the Civil Rights Movement with Afro-Christianity and the black church. Often, McKissick introduced this idea in his lectures with a Biblical passage he claimed whites had "taken to heart" but that blacks had overlooked: "A feast is made for laughter, and wine maketh merry, but money answereth all things."¹⁴⁵ Similarly, in a speech entitled "God's Economic Plan," McKissick insisted that "God was the first industrial developer. God created men of all colors from the start to share as trustees of God. We must continue to carry out God's purpose to use God's land for the benefit of all his people. God's economic plan depends on our being trustees through God's plan."¹⁴⁶ In 1978, McKissick also noted that black Americans "have our ethnic heritage as given us by God with noble assistance from our parents. But politically, we are American first, which fact is not fully understood by all of our majority businessmen."¹⁴⁷ McKissick relied on Christianity, like the free market, to define his middle class African American dream. In doing so, he fused capitalist individualism with the Christian communitarianism of the Civil Rights Movement, capturing the utopianism of both.

While using his own participation in the Civil Rights Movement for legitimization, however, McKissick criticized its goals of the 1960s and long-term effects, thereby demonstrating his sympathies with Black Power. As he wrote in his 1969 book *Three-Fifths*

¹⁴⁵ "McKissick Calls Money Blacks' Path to Equality," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 11 November 1975, box 341, folder 7537, McKissick Papers.

¹⁴⁶ Floyd McKissick, "God's Economic Plan" draft, undated, box 343, folder 7488, in McKissick Papers.

¹⁴⁷ Floyd McKissick, "The Economics of Being Black."

of a Man, the emphasis had to shift “from the more glamorous tactic of nonviolent, direct-action demonstrations to the more tedious, solid tactic of community organizing. Black people... instinctively knew that Black Power was not racist but necessary, not anti-white but pro-Black.”¹⁴⁸ The chief problem with the old Civil Rights leaders, in McKissick’s view, lay in their exclusive focus on black integration into white society. “Integration is a valid concept, but it should not continue to be interpreted as blacks seeking to get into white schools, churches, businesses, etc. There must be a recognition that what blacks have created is just as good for whites... Integration should never mean an absorption of a culture.” Following in the Black Power tradition, McKissick followed this critique with a call for self-reliance. The recognition of African American worthiness, he continued, “should place a greater responsibility on blacks which we are willing to accept.”¹⁴⁹ In McKissick’s worldview, “[e]conomic power is the first prerequisite for political power. Unless the Black man attains economic independence, any ‘political independence’ will be an illusion. White intimidation and control, especially in the ghettos and the rural South, will continue as long as the Blacks are economically dependent.”¹⁵⁰

Soul City, of course, occupied the vital center of McKissick’s plans to correct the misguidance of both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. In “The Economics of Being Black,” a lecture he delivered to the senior management of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana in 1978, Soul City became “the catalytic force for focusing those issues which

¹⁴⁸ Floyd McKissick, *Three Fifths of a Man* (USA: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 140-141.

¹⁴⁹ Floyd McKissick, “The Economics of Being Black,” Address to Standard Oil Company of Indiana Senior Management Meeting, 23 June 1978, box 343, folder 7481b, McKissick Papers.

¹⁵⁰ Floyd McKissick. *Three Fifths of a Man*. 42-43

confront minority businessmen in the American society.”¹⁵¹ McKissick did not stop at minority business empowerment with his assessment of Soul City’s beneficial qualities. “Soul City represents an initiative on behalf of black people to help the nation as a whole solve its problems... For it is Soul City and it may be *only* Soul City,” McKissick pointedly proclaimed, “that provides an interface or a consolidation of all major social issues now confronting the American society.” His seemingly all-inclusive list included “economics, housing, education, underemployment, unemployment, equal rights, civil rights, energy, transportation, poverty, prisons, drugs, paroles, welfare, justice, [and] overpopulation in our cities.”¹⁵²

McKissick’s associate Louis Kelso, an economist, insisted that Soul City would epitomize a “radical capitalism” wherein “a man’s equity or stake in the community will depend on his labor, i.e. will be created by his labor.”¹⁵³ In contrast, Elizabeth Tornquist, of the *North Carolina Anvil*, pointed out that McKissick himself intended to make a profit off the initial capital he had invested in land for Soul City, and that “his whole idea of developing black businesses depends on making enough profit from every venture to have money to invest in others.”¹⁵⁴ This certainly involved capitalism, but its radicalism, in Tornquist’s view, remained doubtful. On the face of it, her assessment, while mostly accurate, proved a bit unfair to McKissick: if he had eschewed a capitalist slant all together, it seems unlikely that the federal government would have supported his endeavors. Thus,

¹⁵¹ Floyd McKissick, “The Economics of Being Black.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Tornquist, “Black Capitalism and Soul City, North Carolina”, *The North Carolina Anvil*, 9 April 1969, box 10, folder 129, Soul City Papers.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

McKissick couched the project in the rhetoric of individualism and the free market rather than communitarian development. Even with Soul City firmly ensconced within a capitalist narrative, McKissick had to shift from the Democratic to the Republican Party in order to garner the necessary support from the federal government. Ironically, this also compromised somewhat his emphasis on self-reliance.

McKissick officially switched his political affiliation in 1972. He steadfastly maintained the decision represented simply the final application of a political pragmatism he had been espousing for the black community for years. Others accused him of selling out in order to attach himself to the rising star of the Nixon administration. Civil Rights activist and Georgia state Representative Julian Bond, for example, delivered a 1972 diatribe against black “political prostitutes” who had joined the “fascist forces” supporting Nixon, “the wizard of the wiretap, the architect of law and order, the former Attorney General.”¹⁵⁵ McKissick, in reply, stressed the importance of the two-party system, insisting “the problems in this country would never be solved as long as black people belonged to and supported only one party.”¹⁵⁶ Three years later, McKissick still faced the same attacks, although their focus had shifted away from the Nixon campaign. To the accusation that Soul City had been a “political pay-off,” McKissick insisted that he could “only say that if this were the case, we would not have languished so long in the HUD pipeline.”¹⁵⁷ While the benefits were not immediate, the practical utility of McKissick’s shift is apparent: in the three years between

¹⁵⁵ “Blacks For Nixon Sharply Rebuked,” *New York Times*, 3 August 1972, p. 25.

¹⁵⁶ “McKissick Calls on Blacks to Join Two-Party Politics,” *New York Times*, 10 August 1972, p. 25.

¹⁵⁷ “Statement by Floyd McKissick, Sr.” Press Conference 20 March 1975, box 343, folder 7479, McKissick Papers.

the public inception of the Soul City project and McKissick's shift to the Republican Party, the federal government provided \$250,000 in grants. In his first three years as a member of the GOP, that amount grew to more than \$19 million.¹⁵⁸ A Soul City promotional book, published in 1975, claimed: "McKissick's move from the Democratic to the Republican Party in 1972 certainly opened doors for him [but as] McKissick himself has said, however, 'What matters is what you do when you get in the door.'"¹⁵⁹

For years McKissick had told anyone willing to listen that African Americans would be wise to shift their political allegiances, although he always carefully crafted his message to please his various audiences. To blacks and liberal whites, he preached not that they should embrace the ideals of the Republican Party so much as utilize the two-party system "to bring fresh ideas and perspectives to the other major political party in this country."¹⁶⁰ To Republicans and the public at large during his campaigning for Nixon, McKissick stressed the GOP's reliance on private enterprise and capitalism rather than the welfare state. As he wrote in an editorial in 1972, "Black Americans who believe in jobs rather than welfare, who want a piece of the action, not a piece of the dole, [should] get behind the New Majority of the President of the United States, Richard Nixon."¹⁶¹

This contrast between private enterprise and "the dole" played a highly significant role in McKissick's thought and in the development of Soul City. By attacking the Democratic

¹⁵⁸ "McKissick Calls Money Blacks' Path to Equality," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 11 November 1975, box 341, folder 7537, McKissick Papers.

¹⁵⁹ The Soul City Foundation, *Soul City*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ "Statement by Floyd McKissick, Sr." Press Conference 20 March 1975, box 343, folder 7479, McKissick Papers.

¹⁶¹ Floyd McKissick, "McKissick for Nixon," *Cincinnati Herald*, 23 September 1972, box 341, folder 7551, McKissick Papers

Party and welfare state subsidies, McKissick focused attention toward his insistence on local communitarianism and self-reliance. The federal government and the Democratic Party, which McKissick often conflated in his speeches after 1972, prevented African Americans from participating fully in the free-market American system by encouraging them to depend on outside sources of support, rather than their own initiative. Americans, in McKissick's assessment, "play God at times, by use of the Congress and over-legislation, and are moving towards killing initiative and incentives to do. This is wrong. I believe that one who works long and hard should be paid in direct proportion to his output." Lest this be considered too close an appeal to socialism, McKissick linked this call to the disappointingly utopian American dream of the founders: "All men are born equal on the day they are born. They do not remain equal in this society."¹⁶² Here again, McKissick linked "radical capitalism" and sweat equity with the drive to improve the lives of African Americans—as individuals. McKissick's continual reliance on male pronouns, it is worth noting, obliquely referenced the emphasis on masculine agency inherent in the project, and echoed the Black Power movement.

The central goal of helping African Americans also proved a major factor in McKissick's relationship with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). McKissick, of course, did not allow his newfound commitment to the Republican Party to forestall his communication with the almost exclusively Democratic CBC. This relationship, moreover, provides another excellent example of McKissick's ability to ply his audiences with the

¹⁶² Floyd McKissick, "The Economics of Being Black."

rhetoric most appropriate to their interests. While McKissick stressed Black Power in the vein of Stokely Carmichael to his everyday black audiences, and economic self-interest and profit margins to his industrial contacts, his communications with the CBC reveal an intensely pragmatic concern with the everyday problems of African American life. Accordingly, this correspondence also contains some of his most explicit references to the multiracial nature of Soul City. For example, in a July 9, 1974 letter to Representative William Clay of Missouri, McKissick described Soul City as an “interracial project that has brought together skills of blacks, whites, and Indians working together under black leadership for the development of one of America’s most economically deprived areas.”¹⁶³ This, in spite of a “widespread mistrust of government, the belief that nothing can be accomplished and the belief that polarization of the races is something we must live with.” Soul City, in McKissick’s plea to the CBC for support, offered nothing less than “a continuation of the integration struggle on the economic frontier—a barrier yet to be penetrated.”¹⁶⁴ In this, McKissick’s rhetoric reflected the growing importance of economic justice in the last days of the classic Civil Rights Movement, channeled most clearly into the Poor People’s Campaign (PPC) of 1968, which called for an expansion of public housing and a guaranteed annual income. McKissick’s focus on the dichotomy between racial and economic polarization followed the rhetoric of that movement, focusing on a multiracial coalition of the poor. As historian Robert T. Chase has written, the PPC failed, in large part, because its economic emphasis repulsed white middle-class liberals, who had formerly

¹⁶³ McKissick to William Clay, 9 July 1974, box 342, folder 7556, McKissick Papers.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

backed racial progress on moral grounds.¹⁶⁵ McKissick, then, aimed to correct this misstep by emphasizing the creation of wealth through self-help, rather than its redistribution—an answer that could appeal to both racial liberals and fiscal conservatives.

In the end, despite Floyd McKissick's political acumen, Soul City quickly floundered after its initial flurry of activity. The reasons for Soul City's failure were as varied and convoluted as the ideas the project was predicated upon. They can, however, largely be traced to McKissick's centrist political posturing, which opened him to attacks from both the political Right and Left. As the *Soul City Sounder* pointed out, Soul City's racial makeup "prompted many conservative publishers to write heated editorials on the evils of Black Separatism and its threats to our society." Simultaneously, Soul City faced an attack from "the more militant component of the black community who is [sic] appalled at the fact that we have white men living and working at Soul City."¹⁶⁶ The project also suffered from consistent opposition from the North Carolina press, a lack of industrial development, and an overly optimistic belief on the part of the planners that proximity to the Research Triangle Park would benefit the community.

Due in large part to McKissick's own conflicting messages, the majority of the public believed Soul City a black-only development. This greatly hurt the project's reputation among Republicans, the very people McKissick courted so intensely. From the outset, the name "Soul City" suggested Black Power and separatism to white conservatives, and perhaps

¹⁶⁵ Robert T. Chase, "Class Resurrection: The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City," *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 40 (1998).

¹⁶⁶ Janice Crump, "What's in Our Name," *The Soul City Sounder*, March 1976, box 10, folder 142, Soul City Papers.

even to white moderates. McKissick and his compatriots continually stressed the multiracial layout of the town, but the distasteful resonance of the word “Soul” with Black Power to likes of U.S Senator Jesse Helms lingered. To the editor of *The Soul City Sounder*, on the other hand, “the name Soul City is not indicative of race. *Soul*, in this case, is a state of being. We are striving to create an environment of love, prosperity, and brotherhood exclusive of racial strife and economic prejudice.”¹⁶⁷ This argument sounds less than convincing given the close association of the word “Soul” as textual identifier with the “Black Power” movement, and, knowing of many of McKissick’s convictions, one can only assume that the association was intentional. What is surprising, then, is that such a masterful politician would select such a divisive title for the crowning project of his life’s work.

For the most part, despite some of his insinuations made during presentations selling Soul City to black audiences, McKissick insisted on Soul City’s projected multiracial nature. Most important, in his view, was the demonstration of capable black leadership of such a project, not the exclusion of other races from the final product. In *Present at the Creation*, a souvenir book available at Soul City’s groundbreaking, McKissick rather angrily insisted that “[i]t’s not going to come out an all-black thing and never was an all-black thing and never was intended to be an all-black thing. Among job applications, you’ll find that we have a tremendous number of white persons who apply for jobs here, who want to work here, who

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

want to move here period.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, whites comprised 40 percent of the initial job applicants at Soul City, and 15 of the community’s 95 residents in 1977.¹⁶⁹

Despite the mounting opposition, it seems likely that McKissick could have maneuvered Soul City to success were it not for an on-going lack of industrial development and the early foreclosure of its HUD loans. By going ahead with the groundbreaking before obtaining a solid commitment from a large industrial employer, McKissick gambled and lost. Warren County, while perhaps an ideal location for McKissick’s dream due to its racial and economic status, remained an unlikely spot for industrial development for many of those same reasons. Similarly, Soul City was poorly located in terms of its appeal to middle class African Americans. This demographic, which should have supplied some of the strongest supporters of such a suburban-style development, remained nonetheless unlikely to return to an economically depressed area of the South, particularly one lacking an employment infrastructure to support them. This sealed Soul City’s fate. McKissick, while adept at co-opting various ideologies to crib support for the project as a utopian community, could not build the practical structures for bridging the gap between his vision and reality.

These problems were not lost on HUD. In announcing the foreclosure of Soul City’s loans William J. White, general manager of HUD’s New Community Development Corporation, explained “We just don’t consider the project economically viable. It’s not a question of mismanagement. The area itself just didn’t work out. There was not enough of a

¹⁶⁸ The Soul City Corporation, *Present at the Creation* Souvenir Book.

¹⁶⁹ Wayne King, “Soul City, N.C., is Moving from Dream Stage to Reality,” *New York Times*, 4 January 1974, p. 34.

market to draw from.”¹⁷⁰ As the *New York Times* pointed out in its coverage of the foreclosure, the original development plans for Soul City called for “a community of 1,824 people and 930 industrial jobs by the end of 1978.” As of June 29, 1979, though, “only 135 people, all but 30 of them black, live in the town, half in mobile homes” while the “large modern office building [Soultech I] has only one tenant, a company making duffel bags for the United States Army.”¹⁷¹ McKissick’s request for an additional \$4 million in guaranteed assistance from HUD, the *Times* continued, prompted the decision to foreclose. Clearly, the *Times* and HUD agreed, McKissick’s dream had been a noble but impossible goal.

In response, McKissick and his supporters lambasted the idea that HUD could accurately judge such a project after only six years of activity. Supporters had funneled massive amounts of money into Soul City by that point: more than \$19 million from the federal government and \$8 million from local sources.¹⁷² Jesse Helms’ legislative assistant Ralph Hill, for example, insisted that Helms’ opposition to the project “was not a personal vendetta, but a matter of fiscal responsibility—they were spending \$26 million to put up 33 homes.”¹⁷³ McKissick and his supporters retorted that these funds had gone “to surrounding communities for the building of roads, water, sewerage and electrical system, recreational and health facilities that provide direct benefits for more than 82,000 people in the region.”¹⁷⁴ John Harris, a white resident of Warren County whose construction firm had been employed

¹⁷⁰ A.O. Sulzberger, “H.U.D. to Foreclose on Soul City, Troubled ‘New Town’ in Carolina,” *New York Times*, 29 June 1979, p. A12.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. In what is presumably the final tragic irony in the story of Soul City, the Soultech I building was later purchased by the state for use as a correctional facility.

¹⁷² Thomas Johnson, “Blacks in Carolina Battle to Save Soul City,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1979, p. A6.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Sulzberger, “H.U.D. to Foreclose on Soul City, Troubled ‘New Town’ in Carolina.”

by Soul City, agreed: “I would like to see anybody do all these things cheaper or better than we have in Soul City. Ninety percent of your cost is always in preparing the area for homes and industry and that’s what we’ve done.”¹⁷⁵

Despite all protestations to the contrary, HUD foreclosed on its loans, and the Soul City project fizzled out. Yet even opponents recognized the integral relationship between McKissick and his town. William White, the HUD manager who made the decision to pull the plug, insisted that his decision had been “very, very difficult. The man put his life into it.”¹⁷⁶ What remains truly impressive about McKissick’s dedication to this project, is the skill with which he sold it to other people. By linking civil rights and capitalism, religion and business, and even communitarianism and individualism, McKissick tried to make Soul City all things to all people, which far surpassed his ability to deliver. Nevertheless, McKissick drew attention to the fundamental links between race and class in American society, and helped illustrate the continuing need for social and economic justice even after the so-called end of the Civil Rights Movement. In this fashion, he placed Soul City at the forefront of the on-going struggle, if only for a small number of people. As Soul City resident Johnie Johnson, “a widow, former domestic, factory worker and civil rights activist,” told the *New York Times* when it announced the foreclosure: “Lord knows, I thought I was through marching, that the struggle was over for me and that I could get a little peace. Now I guess we’ll just have to start marching on H.U.D., and get back into political organizing.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Johnson, “Blacks in Carolina Battle to Save Soul City.”

¹⁷⁶ Sulzberger, “H.U.D. to Foreclose on Soul City, Troubled ‘New Town’ in Carolina.”

¹⁷⁷ Johnson, “Blacks in Carolina Battle to Save Soul City.”

In attempting to construct a communitarian utopia around the rhetoric of conservative free market individualism, McKissick ably demonstrated the conflicted space occupied by radical social movements in late capitalism. The construction of Soul City, indeed, would not only empower African Americans and lay the framework for similar ventures for other minorities, but would help bring into fruition a suburban re-imagining of the “beloved community” of the Civil Rights Movement. McKissick presented Soul City as an assimilationist ideal for African Americans, a black utopia formed by inclusion in the capitalist liberal state and the suburban lifestyle. Like the larger suburban landscape itself, Soul City provided a messy conglomerate of individualism and communitarianism, existing both at that intersection and at that of the planned urban landscape and nature. Standing in stark opposition to the urban dystopia of the underclass and the black market, Soul City’s utopian dream intended it to co-opt the geographic mobility and spatial restructuring of late capitalism on behalf of African Americans. Even through its failure, the narrative image of Soul City stands as an archive of the power of these tropes in American history, and the necessity of McKissick’s brand of politicking in hopes of progressive reform.

CHAPTER III

“Whatever Happened to ‘the Personal is Political?’” Ms. and Feminism in the Context of the Rise of the New Right

In 1973, a reporter for the Kean College newspaper attending a lecture by feminist Robin Morgan expressed surprise to find she was “not a type of monster who, while foaming at the mouth, spews forth four-lettered condemnation of the male species.” Instead, Morgan was “well-spoken, intelligent, witty, articulate” and able “to discuss logically and rationally a particular point of view without resorting to a barrage of street language tactics.”¹⁷⁸ This subtly classist and racist description, associating feminist protest with hysteria and the upheaval of the 1960s, typified the centrist American dismissal of radicalism in favor of law and order. Later that same year, Morgan herself described the similarly hysterical “general stereotype” of feminists, women “ten or twelve feet tall, [who] have two heads, each with a pair of horns, and they sprout fire. And they’re nervous, neurotic, hysterical, frigid, castrating bitches, lesbians and witches.” Yet Morgan made the most of the marginalization of the feminist movement, and deftly co-opted this media-driven image: “I’ll start by saying that this shocking stereotype is first of all absolutely true.” By utilizing this image of the monstrous and outlandish radical feminist, Morgan colorfully reinforced her point that the period of feminists “being nice ladies” and “asking politely for a crumb of human dignity” had ended. Inverting and co-opting the process of othering inherent in this stereotyping,

¹⁷⁸ C. M. Amyx, “Outside the Ghetto Kitchen,” *Kean College Townsend Lecture Series Newsletter*, November 29, 1973, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1973, 1 of 2,” Robin Morgan Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University [Hereafter cited as Morgan Papers].

Morgan emphasized the inclusivity of radical feminism: “We are women that men have warned us about.”¹⁷⁹

By the latter part of the decade, however, Morgan was a contributing editor at *Ms.*, a commercial publication enmeshed in the liberal capitalist system, and whose message certainly did not espouse the idea that feminism appealed to the monstrous or the radical. Appropriately, Morgan herself had shifted political priorities in the intervening years. In 1978, for example, she had been “schlepping about for a year pushing the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], a basic necessity for women *and men* in our culture.” It is hard to imagine the Morgan of the early years of the decade supporting such a mainstream liberal agenda, or involving both women and men in her cause. This broadened coalition proved necessary, she wrote, because of “an extremely powerful and rising right wing in this country” which claimed women like Anita Bryant and Phyllis Schlafly as “pawns, the velvet gloves on the iron male fists” of conservatism.¹⁸⁰ Because of the growing influence of the New Right, feminists could no longer afford the kind of internecine sectarianism that had plagued the second wave and so much of the American Left. Most particularly, long-standing disputes about the usefulness of radical as opposed to liberal reformist approaches to feminism had wracked much of the women’s movement.¹⁸¹ When stacked up against the conservative

¹⁷⁹ Kathy Enerlich, “Feminist Voice,” *The Independent*, December 6, 1973, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1973, 1 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

¹⁸⁰ Jeannie Williams, “The Women’s Movement at Crossroads,” *Rochester Times-Union*, unknown date, 1978, box SP2, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1978, 2 of 3,” Morgan Papers. [Emphasis added].

¹⁸¹ Historian Stephanie Gilmore has insisted that the radical/liberal divide has been overplayed in presentations of the second wave. While her argument—that there was no sharp line between the two—is a strong one, the fact remains that there existed soft divide of ideological and rhetorical differences between these aspects of the movement. See Stephanie Gilmore, “The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-1982: Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide,” *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 2003).

backlash, Morgan—who had played her fair share in many of these arguments—recognized that feminism required solidarity to survive.

Ms., during this shift, occupied an eminently visible place in the women’s movement. As such, its ideology—and, by extension, Morgan’s—continually evolved in response to the changing political and electoral shifts of the 1970s. Family, in particular, became an area of fierce contestation between feminism and the New Right, with both movements possessing utopian impulses relying on normative ideas of the white, heterosexual middle-class familial unit. Feminists—particularly the liberal variety oriented toward *Ms.*—while reliant on this ideal to appeal to the mainstream, remained simultaneously willing to include single parents and same-sex couples. Aware, in other words, of the existence and viability of alternative family models, *Ms.* was nonetheless constrained to present itself and its ideology in a manner that would sell magazines. The New Right, conversely, focused almost exclusively on a gendered hierarchical conformity dedicated to upholding “traditional” family structures and values.¹⁸² The feminist focus on the link between the personal and the political closely related to this familial contestation, locating a deeply political battleground within the most personal of communities. Indeed, perhaps the most utopian of feminist ideals—that of “universal sisterhood”—explicitly reproduced it.

In this climate, the presentation of *Ms.* relied heavily on the kind of duality that Fredric Jameson set forth in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.” To Jameson, in late capitalism “works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time

¹⁸² For an apt dismissal of the accuracy of this mythic insistence on a lost era of utopian families, see Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (USA: Basic Books, 1992)

being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated.”¹⁸³ For the magazine, this was most clearly articulated in its tension between a utopian radicalism, focused on a universal sisterhood that transcended all other divisions, and a more pragmatic individualized liberalism. This dichotomy allowed *Ms.* to exist simultaneously as an idealized communal document, an open forum for discussion about the state of the movement in the United States, and a business, constrained by the free market, driven by advertising that often commodified feminism.¹⁸⁴

The editors, however, sought to downplay this tension, emphasizing a synthesis between its two poles. By drawing heavily on the radical feminist idea that “the personal is political,” *Ms.* encouraged a conception of personal growth and independence as an expression of its brand of radicalism. The magazine fostered this individualized rebellion to link lifestyle to protest, using feminist-themed advertising to push a commodity-based culture, all the while opposing the New Right from a liberal standpoint. In this schema, consumption, and by extension the consumer-oriented middle class, became more radical than the industrially productive working class, as *Ms.* targeted white middle-class women as political feminists.¹⁸⁵ Its primary audience, suburban housewives were most likely to identify

¹⁸³ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*, No. 1 (Winter 1979), 144.

¹⁸⁴ Amy Farrell’s *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) focuses on a discussion of the discursive and contested nature of *Ms.* I am, therefore, indebted to her.

¹⁸⁵ The rise in this manner of thinking mirrored the recognitions of postmodernism or late capitalism, and this form of consumptive cultural feminism in particular follows the New Left’s rejection of the “labor metaphysic” in favor of “New Class” theories. The early and middle stages of Barbara Ehrenreich’s career make this connection most explicit. See, for example, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” (*Radical America*, March-April 1977), co-authored with John Ehrenreich; *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight From*

with the individualized cultural feminist mindset—and most likely to spend the money to subscribe to a feminist magazine and engage with the advertising contained therein. What we could call “hip capitalism,” the intersection of the spectacle of radical fringe culture and the marketplace, exists on the edges of any social movement in the modern United States. *Ms.*, though, provides a particularly candid example of an attempt to meld the market and radicalism, an odd blend of complacent consumerism and righteous protest—justified by the colossus of the New Right.

Race, an issue unfortunately often ignored in discussions of second-wave feminism, played a hugely important role in the rising backlash on the Right, as did the cultural revolutions and student radicalism of the 1960s.¹⁸⁶ Historian Dan Carter has argued persuasively that the Civil Rights Movement not only influenced the other radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but that the movement’s equally significant “counterrevolutionary effects” grew from an initial “politics of racial conservatism” into a “general program of resistance to the changes sweeping American society.”¹⁸⁷ Feminism, however, also played a large role in the resurgence of conservatism, which relied on a traditional view of gender and family roles. While the law-and-order reaction against the Civil Rights Movement and the more aggressive moment of Black Power formed a displaced fear, the feminist movement hit closer to home—possibly even within the family itself.

Commitment (New York: Anchor Press, 1983; and *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (USA: HarperPerennial, 1990).

¹⁸⁶ Benita Roth’s *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Becky Thompson’s “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2002) provide excellent reflections on this problem.

¹⁸⁷ Dan Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), xiii-xiv.

Feminism, then, represented a more personal phenomenon not only for the members of the second-wave itself, but also for its opponents among the white “silent majority.”

This backlash on the Right, journalist Susan Faludi has pointed out, responded not to the actual successes of the second wave, but to the possibility that women might actually achieve equal status in American society.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, she even goes so far as to predicate the New Right’s existence on its preemptive reaction against the second wave, a “doubly demeaning” role for such a masculine movement. While accurate to some degree, Faludi’s portrait overstates her case and fails to capture the entire narrative. Even as the New Right utilized the popular discomfort with feminism to insist on a “return” to traditional family models, *Ms.* and the more liberal branch of American feminism used conservatism’s rising power to draw attention to the problematic place of women in modern America. The oppositional relationship, clearly, flowed both ways. Faludi’s interpretation of women working on behalf of the New Right—the Phyllis Schlaflys and the Beverly LaHayes of the nation—makes some important points while falling just short of a full picture. Calling attention to the close relationship of these outspoken women’s personal lives with the ideals of feminism, Faludi accused them of rank hypocrisy in terms of their ideology—relaying “noxious antifeminist sentiments” while embracing “far more of the feminist platform than either they or their male leaders let on—or perhaps realized.”¹⁸⁹ What she failed to consider, however, is the possibility that these women of the New Right had co-opted the feminist movement, inasmuch as they had incorporated the expansion of personal agency for women

¹⁸⁸ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: the Undeclared War Against American Women*, (New York: Crown Press, 1991), xx.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 237-238.

into a kind of “moral crusader” role. The 1970s, then, marked not only the adaptation of radical feminist ideals into the individualized and consumptive liberal mainstream of *Ms.*, but to the market-obsessed Right as well.

Robin Morgan first came to *Ms.*’s offices in 1972 as a representative of the group “New York Radical Women,” suspicious of the new magazine’s advertising selections in its first issue and its lack of ties to established radical feminists. Morgan later claimed that on this visit she “found *Ms.* far too accommodating and not radical enough,” remembering the staff “trying to co-opt us on the spot, asking, ‘What should we do? What will make the magazine stronger.’” Despite this friction, the delegation of radical feminists chose to bide their time, leaving the meeting “without any great hopes... but with no plans to picket either.”¹⁹⁰ By 1974, though, Morgan had agreed to publish some of her poetry in the magazine, and in December 1977 joined as a contributor and “de facto... staff editor.” *Ms.*, indeed, functioned at times as a vehicle for Morgan to move away from the theory-oriented radicalism of her earlier years. As she wrote in 1975, reflecting on the “obscure, yea, unintelligible” language of her earlier manifestos, she had realized that the “risk-taking, subjective voice of poetry is more honestly my style, and so, to look at the Women’s Movement, I go to the mirror—and gaze at myself.” While not trying to claim for herself the title of “everywoman,” Morgan did “still believe... that the personal is political,” and that the “necessary integration of exterior realities and interior imperatives” helped make the

¹⁹⁰ Mary Thom, *Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 70.

movement “unique, less abstract, and more functionally *possible* than previous movements for social change.”¹⁹¹ At the same time, Morgan’s emphatic self-reflection aptly expressed the narcissism to which the individual-focused cultural feminism could lead.

Ms., indeed, was often closely associated with the mainstreaming of the women’s movement and the associated rise of cultural feminism. Alice Echols, one of the earliest historians of the second wave, described this branch of feminism as a move “away from opposing male supremacy to creating a female counterculture... where ‘male’ values would be exorcized and ‘female’ values nurtured” and where “patriarchy was evaded rather than engaged.” In this stage, the focus of feminism became “one of personal rather than social transformation.”¹⁹² Historian Ruth Rosen draws a more distinct line between these two movements, having written that “[a]longside [radical feminism] grew another kind of feminism,” a kind of feminist false consciousness “that existed largely in the kingdom of images, shaped by the media and by the consumerist” mindset of the 1970s.¹⁹³ Indeed, in Rosen’s construction the media falsely depicted “the feminist as an eager participant in America’s wildly accelerating consumer and therapeutic society, joining prosperous men in the creation of a life dedicated to consumption and self-absorption.”¹⁹⁴ Feeding this trend, the editors of *Ms.* encouraged an individualistic brand of feminism that appealed to the middle class by emphasizing personal agency and consumption. Furthermore, in presenting *Ms.* as

¹⁹¹ Robin Morgan, “Rights of Passage,” *Ms.* (September 1975), 77-78.

¹⁹² Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 5.

¹⁹³ Rosen, unfortunately, devotes little attention to the role of *Ms.* and other women’s magazines in this shift, and overstates the separation between the two tendencies.

¹⁹⁴ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open*, (NY: Penguin, 2006), 295.

an avenue by which to reform the male-centered advertising industry, the editors attempted not to replace capitalism itself, but to move toward enacting a progressive agenda within the existing system.

Accordingly, *Ms.* occupied a contested role within the feminist movement, with many women criticizing its implicit support of the capitalist system, others critiquing its class and race biases, and still others supporting it as a worthwhile reformist effort. The proprietary view and closely personal relationship that readers often held toward the magazine—and which *Ms.* encouraged—complicated this dispute. The fact that the magazine depended on advertising revenue to cover expenses further exacerbated such tensions. Many feminists felt that the magazine should have presented a pure expression of feminist discourse in the public sphere, attacking the authenticity of a text “contaminated” by the intrusion of market-based commodities. This complaint, however, merely called attention to the seemingly paradoxical position of the magazine: seeking to occupy the forefront of a progressive and often anti-capitalist movement, and yet situated within an explicitly market-oriented business framework. In order to sell its brand of feminism, derived from the radical feminist movement, *Ms.* turned away from a critique of capitalist American liberalism as a whole and toward a reformation of the place of women within that structure. Yet in the eyes of many of those associated with *Ms.*, the magazine’s feminism remained radical even as it failed to criticize the general hegemony of late capitalism.

In pushing for feminist progress even while reacting against the resurgent patriarchy on the New Right, *Ms.* relied heavily on the radical feminist assertion that “the personal is

political,” that the practice of everyday life both reflected and influenced the political structure as a whole. The exact origin of the phrase “the personal is political” remains shrouded in mystery—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the turbulent climate of the 1960s.¹⁹⁵ By all accounts, though, this significant development of American second-wave feminism was tied closely to both the split of radical feminism from the New Left and the associated rise of consciousness-raising (CR) sessions among women. These events, which former *Ms.* editor Mary Thom described as women coming together “to share details of their own lives in order to, first, forge a connection with other women, and, second, change the world,” proved an integral part of this association of the personal with the political.¹⁹⁶ Consciousness-raising was intended to lead to a “moment of truth... shock of recognition... [i]nstant sisterhood,” a moment known within the magazine as a “click,” a relation of each woman’s life to the larger issues at hand. As Jane O’Reilly put it in “The Housewife’s Moment of Truth,” “[o]ne little click turns on a thousand others.”¹⁹⁷ “Click,” indeed, became a common catchphrase in letters to the magazine, as readers wrote in and used the term to describe their own awakenings.

Unfortunately, the outgrowth of politics from consciousness-raising also fed the tendency to assume the universality of one’s own experience. The CR-derived focus on the individual, in concert with radical feminism’s often stringent rejection of the New Left, led

¹⁹⁵ Mary Thom, a *Ms.* editor who wrote an insider’s look at the history of the magazine in 1998, attributed the phrase to Robin Morgan, while historians Alice Echols and Ruth Rosen both give credit to Carol Hanisch. See Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 4; Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 382; and Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 196.

¹⁹⁶ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 4. Much of my presentation of the history of *Ms.* is drawn from Thom’s account, which is certainly a biased history and, moreover, lacking in references and footnotes. Acknowledging that it was not written for an academic audience, however, I will nonetheless rely on her insider’s account of the early years of the magazine, supplementing it whenever possible with other sources.

¹⁹⁷ Jane O’Reilly, “The Housewife’s Moment of Truth,” *Ms.* (Spring 1972), 54.

some feminists to ignore larger class or societal structures in favor of a focus on individual agency. This habit, combined with the typical identity of *Ms.* editors as white, heterosexual, relatively affluent women, fit nicely with the magazine's purpose of reformism funded by advertising revenue. *Ms.*, then, became part of a larger trend in American cultural feminism that progressed from an insistence on the close relationship between the personal and the political to a belief that making the personal right would fix the political. Radical feminists, however, intended consciousness-raising, though rooted in the individual experience, to foster identification with other women as well. As Rosen reminds us, in addition to "the personal is political" two of the most common refrains of the second wave had been "there are no individual solutions" and "none of us are free until we are all free."¹⁹⁸ *Ms.* always existed uneasily in the dichotomy between individualism and sisterhood, sometimes combining the worst impulses of both.

The idea of *Ms.* originated with Gloria Steinem, an author and feminist activist, in the early 1970s. Working with the Women's Action Alliance (WAA) in 1971, her initial plan called for a national newsletter to "circulate information about how to organize nonsexist child care or set up a campus women's center or provide rape crisis counseling."¹⁹⁹ In addition to formalizing this informative network, the women of the WAA hoped that the newsletter would generate funds for the nonprofit organization. As the idea of a bare-bones periodical grew into the dream of a full-fledged commercial magazine, Steinem and her compatriots initially encountered difficulty raising sufficient start-up capital. To that end,

¹⁹⁸ Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 295.

¹⁹⁹ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 7.

Steinem and her associate Beth Harris turned to Clay Felker, publisher of *New York* magazine, for which Steinem had been writing. Felker had been looking for a subject for a “one-shot” magazine, a kind of trial-run that would stay on periodical shelves for an extended period in order to pay for production costs. Thus, he agreed to publish a “preview” issue of *Ms.* packaged with his own magazine. This issue shipped with the year-end edition of *New York* in December 1971, with *Ms.* splitting the profits fifty-fifty with the older magazine.²⁰⁰

The founders of the magazine selected the name “*Ms.*” for its contentious and politically significant connotations. As a personal title that did not denote marital status, “*Ms.*” signified the association of the magazine with independent women, married or not. As an advertisement soliciting subscriptions in the preview issue put it, where “woman” had negative connotations such as “dame, bitch...chattel, biddy... frail... babe, baby doll, bag, doll, wench, weaker sex, [and] lesser vessel,” “*Ms.*” represented “a form of address meaning whole person, female.”²⁰¹ At the same time, “*Ms.*” was not yet a common enough term to trigger recognition with everyone who encountered the magazine. In Thom’s account, early employees at the magazine had to continually explain “that the name was pronounced ‘Miz’ and spelled ‘em ess’ and, no, it was not an abbreviation for manuscript and it had nothing to do with any disease—except, of course, sexism.” The title, she insisted, cemented the *Ms.* reader’s utopian sense of identity as a woman who “was independent [and] would not be defined by her relationship, or lack of it, to a man, be it husband or father. She stood up for

²⁰⁰ Drawn from Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 7-12.

²⁰¹ *Ms.* (Spring 1972), 113.

herself. She accepted responsibility for herself. She refused to be passed over.”²⁰² Even the name of the magazine, then, was linked to an individualized idea of freedom closely tied to the brand of feminism growing out of the disaffection of white middle-class housewives. By reifying this brand of woman from the very beginning, the magazine’s founders relied on the Jamesonian duality of the ideological and the utopian, presenting this ideal—and implicitly raced and classed—woman as a “genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated.” Clearly, in a short time, they had already traveled a long way from the collective mission of groups like the WAA.

Following in the footsteps of the larger second wave, the editors of *Ms.* attempted to distribute power in an egalitarian manner in order to avoid the office hierarchies of the traditional corporate chain-of-command of most commercial monthlies. Mary Thom asserted that this structure emanated from “an intense identification between editor and audience that was built into the premise of the founders of *Ms.*—they were determined to write for and edit a magazine that they would want to read.” The audience reciprocated this ideal relationship by responding to the magazine in unprecedented numbers, often identifying with it in a clearly personal manner. As Thom put it, “[i]f women’s lives were the text, after all, who could not have an opinion”—either writers or readers?²⁰³ By so closely conflating the personal and the political, and so often relying on individual stories to make their points, *Ms.*’s editors helped construct a milieu wherein, ideally, any woman would feel welcome to contribute—and appreciated for doing so.

²⁰² Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 13.

²⁰³ Ibid., 72-73.

This did not always work out. Author Elizabeth Brelin, for example, wrote to *Ms.* in 1980 to complain about the treatment of her story manuscripts, having expected that the magazine “would promote humane treatment of contributors since the magazine’s thesis is the betterment of society through speak-outs on human rights issues and, particularly, the rights of women.” Based on these expectations, Brelin expected that *Ms.* and other feminist publications would be particularly respectful toward their contributors. In her experience, however, they had been “the most rude and discourteous” in handling her manuscripts. Specifically, manuscripts returned with “coffee stains and finger-prints on pages, torn pages and folded pages” offended Brelin and made her doubt the “decorum” of the magazine—and her own utopian ideals about the state of feminism.²⁰⁴

Robin Morgan, in responding to Brelin, touched on many of *Ms.*’s own utopian principles in her defense of the magazine. In her experience, “the worst treatment was not by ‘feminist’ periodicals or publishers, but in fact by the establishment ones.” This, despite the mainstream magazines having “a far bigger budget, staff, access [*sic*] to materials, etc. than even a national feminist magazine like Ms.” Moreover, the close relationship between readers, editors, and writers in the *Ms.* milieu meant the volume of material submitted to *Ms.* was far greater than that received by traditional magazines. Asking if Brelin could imagine the mass of submissions that *Ms.* received, “many from women who have never written anything before at all,” Morgan referenced the positive side of the emphasis on consciousness-raising in the feminist community: women who would never have felt

²⁰⁴ Elizabeth Brelin to Morgan, 6 April 1980, box S6, folder “Subject Files: Ms. General, 1970s-1980s,” Morgan Papers.

comfortable expressing themselves in such a manner in the past felt empowered enough to do so. Furthermore, Morgan asked Brelin to remember that “an institution like Ms. tries to be feminist in its structure” in addition to its content. This meant, unlike traditional magazines, “no ‘secretaries’ per se, working parents permitted to bring children to the office...part-time employees... attempts at editorial consensus through collective communication, and so forth.” None of this, Morgan admitted, excused the treatment of Brelin’s manuscript, but she still ended her response with a subtle dig: “We are always so much harder on each other as women (a new double standard!) than on the patriarchy.”²⁰⁵

The focus on feminist structure in addition to content occupied a central role in *Ms.*’s existence as an idealized discursive site in the second wave. As Thom noted, the magazine’s agenda did make it “seem more like a social movement than a national magazine, and both the staff and the watching world expected feminist principles to govern all levels of activity.”²⁰⁶ Ex-staff member Ellen Willis similarly observed in 1975 that “*Ms.* is not simply a magazine, but a political organization [which] presents itself—and is seen by many women as a center of leadership for the women’s movement.”²⁰⁷ Much as Jameson suggested, the utopian idealization of the magazine constructed by both staff members and readers involved not only a “drive toward collectivity” but indeed the salvation of “the social order... from unworthy leadership” through such communal organizing.

²⁰⁵ Morgan to Elizabeth Brelin, 11 April 1980, box S6, folder “Subject Files: Ms. General, 1970s-1980s,” Morgan Papers.

²⁰⁶ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 44.

²⁰⁷ Ellen Willis, “The Conservatism of MS.,” in *Feminist Revolution*, (NY: Random House, Inc., 1978), 170.

In practice, this attempt at an egalitarian structure caused the magazine a great deal of problems. As with many other utopian experiments, *Ms.*'s communalism often led to an unclear chain of command, with too many cooks in the kitchen, as it were. Thom remembered that the magazine's insistence on egalitarianism led to "an editing style that was definitely hands-on." While quick to assert that content was "not subjected to a majority vote or edited in a communal circle," Thom recognized that *Ms.* lacked "the usual hierarchy of an editor at the top making all the decisions." Mary Peacock, who as a senior editor oversaw more of this process than did Thom, took a more critical view of the magazine's practices. Recalling that both writers and editors complained about the "group edit thing," Peacock lamented the fact that the editors of *Ms.* "were stupid enough to let everybody know they were part of a glorious revolutionary experience," in which all of the staff "down to the floor mopper" were involved. In hindsight, Peacock found it "hilarious" that the staff of *Ms.* thought that this kind of communal structure "would be some kind of a pleasure."²⁰⁸

Ms.'s structure shared with both the second wave and the New Left the problem of death-by-committee, an unfortunate by-product of such attempts to build an egalitarian utopia. Similarly, the shared emphasis on living as if the revolution had already taken place led to a common conflation of means and ends. In the case of *Ms.*, this confusion—or more precisely this dialectic of ideological structure and content—became a torturous tension as the decade wore on, with articles skewed more and more toward the white middle class. The association between the New Left and the early radical feminists—including Morgan—and

²⁰⁸ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 73.

the later rift between them helps to explain the nominal rejection of class-based politics in later feminism. Having rejected the sexism of many of the male student activists of the 1960s, an unfortunate number of feminists—again, Morgan included—simultaneously cast aside the politics of the Left. In practice, however, this shift often involved turning a blind eye toward race and class divisions, emphasizing the utopian “universal sisterhood” that tended to revolve around the concerns of middle-class white women.

In “Goodbye to All That,” an essay published in 1970, Robin Morgan set down the foundational manifesto of this post-Left feminism. The essay first appeared in *Rat*, an established underground journal of the Left, occupied at the time by a variety of feminists upset with the zine’s male-centric presentation. Morgan, identifying herself as a member of WITCH—“Women Inspired to Commit Herstory”—used this “women’s seizure of a male-run newspaper… the first such action in the Left” to “express certain thoughts that had been boiling inside [her] for some time.” The resultant essay bade “goodbye forever” to the “counterfeit Left, counter-left, male-dominated cracked-glass-mirror reflection of the Amerikan Nightmare,” leaving women as “the real Left.” This “genuine Left,” unlike the false one, would not behave as a “microcosm of capitalist economy” where men competed for power and status and women did “all the work” and “function[ed] as objectified prizes or ‘coin.’” As Morgan wrote with a characteristic lack of modesty years later, this piece “apparently articulated the experience of most women in the Left, and became an instant classic [which was] read aloud in struggle meetings, quoted, fought about, cried over,

excerpted on posters and banners, used (individual lines and phrases) for slogans, and widely reprinted.”²⁰⁹

“Goodbye to All That,” then, signified the final break in a long line of manifestos written by women concerned with the existence of patriarchy on the Left. Casey Hayden and Mary King’s “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo” provided the most famous early example.²¹⁰ Their piece, addressed to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1965, underscored the increasingly conscious movement of women working inside the civil rights campaign by calling attention to both the “many parallels... between treatment of Negroes and treatment of women” in American society, and to the “caste system” of work applied to women both inside and outside the movement. Hayden and King also offered an early articulation of the second wave’s personal focus, noting that they had “learned from the [civil rights] movement to think radically about the personal worth and abilities of people whose role in society had gone unchallenged before.”²¹¹

Morgan, unlike the majority of the early *Ms.* staffers, had personally experienced this early blossoming of Left-associated feminism, the later transition to radical feminism, and finally the growth of cultural feminism.²¹² As such, the evolution of Morgan’s thought provides an insight into the relationship between *Ms.*’s brand of mainstream feminism and

²⁰⁹ Robin Morgan, “Goodbye to All That,” in *The Word of a Woman*, (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 51, 58 and 68. This assertion is highly intriguing given the importance of repetition and mass production in the works of theorists of late capitalism such as Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy DeBord.

²¹⁰ See Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 112-113.

²¹¹ Casey Hayden and Mary King, “Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo,” in Timothy McCarthy and John McMillian, eds., *The Radical Reader*, (NY: The New Press, 2003), 418-419.

²¹² This was one of the major points of contention that second-wave activists had with *Ms.*, which they viewed as an organization of opportunists who largely lacked any kind of previous engagement with the movement. See Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 154; and Carol Hanisch, “The Liberal Takeover of Women’s Liberation,” in *Feminist Revolution*, (NY: Random House, Inc., 1978), 163.

the more radical and politically-oriented branches of the second wave. In 1973, Morgan herself set forth a definition of the various branches of feminism, dismissing those outside of her own ideological strand. She wrote off mainstream liberal feminists, or the movement for “Women’s Civil Rights,” as reformists seeking to work within the liberal patriarchal system, whose efforts, “as well-meaning and as well-organized as they might have been, terminated in tokenism and eventual sell-out on the part of the male establishment.” The “Women’s Liberation Movement,” in contrast, were feminists associated with the New Left, which Morgan derided as “the boys’ movement stemming from the anti-war and ecological protest movements,” and wherein the “place of women... was one of making coffee, not policy.” Lastly, radical feminism, “the most dangerous faction,” set itself against “all the patriarchal sociological, economic and political bounds.” At this point, Morgan considered herself a member of this final branch. Not surprisingly, she also judged it not only the most dangerous but the most difficult, because of “the fact that there are no past examples or models to draw upon.”²¹³ That in mind, Morgan insisted that radical feminism must have “a grassroots appeal to all women,” which “must be one of a total life aspect.” In practice, this would entail “a self-help concept” revolving around the “efforts of women reclaiming their own bodies and minds.”²¹⁴ Morgan, even while violently rejecting the New Left, remained remarkably candid about her call for an individualistic self-help approach to radicalism.

While the New Left, in line with classical Marxism, tended to view class as the ultimate determinant of inequality, Morgan’s brand of post-Left radical feminism

²¹³ This generational idea of a “virgin birth” of social movements was, unfortunately, a hallmark of the 1960s.

²¹⁴ Amyx, “Outside the Ghetto Kitchen.”

foregrounded sexism as the root of oppression. “Patriarchal society,” a college paper reported Morgan saying in 1972, resembled “the structure of a tree with many ‘evil’ branches, including capitalism, racism, imperialism, and discrimination.” The Left had long attempted “to kill this evil tree by ‘hacking away at the branches,’ but to “no avail, for the branches all grow back in time.” Morgan’s branch of radical feminists argued instead “that sexism is the root of the ‘evil’ tree, and the only way to rid the world of injustice is to get at the root.” To rid the world of patriarchy, then, Morgan’s radical feminists had to alter the fabric of society itself.²¹⁵ On another occasion, she asserted—in an oddly gendered way—that patriarchy provided “the birth of the concept of ownership,” predating capitalism and the concept of class itself.²¹⁶ Morgan’s rejection of economic materialism and the so-called “labor metaphysic” sometimes crossed the line into outright hostility: as she explained to the feminist journal *Goodbye to All That*—named for her own essay—in 1973, feminists did in fact have a class analysis: “There are two classes, men and women. The former oppress the latter. The latter are now rising up all over the globe. The former are doomed to change or die. The latter will win.”²¹⁷ Radical feminism, then, had moved beyond traditional politics—was “neither a part of the left or the right”—and had “one priority, and only one, and that is women.” By emphasizing sexism as the root of oppression, radical feminists “refuse[d] tokenism” and insisted on “a total revolution: political, economic, gender[ed], biological,

²¹⁵ June Caffrey, “Robin Morgan Delivers Keynote,” *The Bucknellian* 27 October 1972, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1972,” Morgan Papers.

²¹⁶ Elaine Lattimer, “Feminist calls men ‘gnats,’” *Connecticut Daily Campus*, 16 February 1973, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1973, 2 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

²¹⁷ Morgan to Goodbye to All That, 9 March 1973, box C5, folder “Correspondence by Decade: 1970s, Unsorted, Folder 2 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

cultural, social and even metaphysical.”²¹⁸ This era of Morgan’s thought emphasized a utopian upheaval in the social order, but still relied on tying awakened individual consciousness to the collective power of white women.

This radical period found Morgan criticizing not only collaboration with liberals, but with men in general. Following in the footsteps of her insistence on allowing only female members of the media to report on the feminist protest at the 1968 Miss America Pageant, Morgan refused to answer questions from men during her lecture tours of the early 1970s. Explaining herself at the University of Connecticut in 1973, Morgan argued that men “have the brains of a Neanderthal gnat and should not dominate the conversation.”²¹⁹ Elsewhere, Morgan set forth three reasons for this refusal. First, she wanted to promote the “need for an autonomous and strong feminist movement.” Second, she had a “personal feeling that most questions coming from men are not worthwhile to answer,” and last, she believed “that the feminist... should be a man-hater.” Similarly, Morgan insisted that women “need a taste of power through consciousness-raising,” and that “men should get a glimpse of what women go through every day of their lives.”²²⁰ All of the reports from Morgan’s early-1970s lectures describe her inflexibility in this matter, and how often her refusal to listen to men “nearly caused a riot in the lecture hall... [when most] of the men walked out and some of them did their best to speak their minds, which ended up to be a useless effort.”²²¹ None of them, however, analyzed the fact that discourse of this kind focused on Morgan’s ability to create a

²¹⁸ Enerlich, “Feminist Voice.”

²¹⁹ Lattimer, “Feminist calls men ‘gnats.’”

²²⁰ Caffrey, “Robin Morgan Delivers Keynote.”

²²¹ Kathy Enerlich, “One Woman’s View of Robin Morgan,” *The Independent*, December 6, 1973, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1973, 1 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

spectacle, using scandal to draw attention to herself and, therefore, her cause. This would later feed the politics of image and individualism that *Ms.* came to dominate in the next decade.

Alongside her lack of interest in dialogue with men during this period, Morgan insisted that the goal of radical feminism should not lie in a reform of or collaboration with male patriarchal society. Where reformers wanted a “part of the pie,” Morgan believed instead that “[t]he pie is rotten, and the task of the radical feminist is to rebake the pie.”²²² This reliance on the traditionally feminine imagery of baking is a surprising one in the context of Morgan’s early years, and would seem more appropriate during her tenure at *Ms.*, when she and the other editors attempted to meld feminism with the life of middle-class women. At another lecture, Morgan declared “I have no ambition to be equal to what men are. That makes me want to throw up just thinking about [sic] it. What I want to do is change men.” Again referencing the “shocking” realization that feminists “are the women that men have warned us about,” Morgan reminded her cohorts that the second wave was “made up of women from all walks of life” who “don’t want a wing, a toe or a foot; we want it all. *We* want the power even if power is a dirty word these days.”²²³ At this point, Morgan continued to insist on the collective expression of individual agency exercised through grassroots organization.

It was this interest in power and “grassroots change,” Morgan insisted, that drew women to radical feminism. Turning again to the idea of universal sisterhood, she felt

²²² Caffrey, “Robin Morgan Delivers Keynote.”

²²³ Carol Conrow, “Women Oust Male Heckler,” *The Kansas City Times*, 17 November 1973, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1973, 1 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

comfortable asserting that “women of all ages and classes and races relate more to changes that will affect their own daily lives, than to a couple more corporation heads that are women or a couple more women in Congress.” Working to attain representation within the upper echelons of the system was “all very well and good, but it is sort of something out there.” Radical feminists emphasized instead “immediate change and change in a very concrete way,” via “demands that are made in terms of the right to control your own body, child care centers, self-help medical and legal groups, rape crisis centers,” and so forth.²²⁴ Morgan’s “radical feminists,” clearly, had much in common with cultural feminism. Even before her association with *Ms.*, Morgan predicated her radical feminism around the reorganization and empowerment of the everyday life of the individual. Her ideological shift from a class-based politics to an emphasis on individualized growth encapsulates the larger move of feminist politics away from a utopian collectivity and toward the traditional American dream—itself a utopian ideal, but one centered on the potential of the individual, instead of the many.

In the context of the 1970s, Morgan’s shift in view came about largely because of the increasing power and numbers of the New Right, which had, in turn, spent the decade constructing much of its domestic politics specifically around the rejection of the second wave, and of the social movements of the 1960s more generally. For Morgan and many other feminists, this necessitated a reevaluation of both the second wave’s sectarianism and radical feminism’s refusal to engage with the liberal political system. For the New Right—and thus for the women’s movement in turn—this contestation revolved around the family, with the

²²⁴ Kathy Enerlich and Marian La Pierre, “Speaking with Robin Morgan,” *The Independent*, December 6, 1973, box SP1, folder “Lectures and Readings, 1973, 1 of 2,” Morgan Papers. [Emphasis added]

resurgent conservative movement politicizing and then capitalizing on the “traditional American family,” which they viewed as perilously endangered by the changes of the 1960s. The second wave’s insistence on equality, in the New Right’s interpretation, had promoted an insidious materialism for women predicated on the self rather than the family, and undermined the traditional—and moral—family structure.²²⁵

In 1979, Morgan published an article on this “rising Right Wing,” a “strong, scary” movement that had targeted feminists “as the major force threatening the status quo.” To Morgan, this conservative backlash appeared so frightening because it combined old money with a new ideology and a new scapegoat in the feminist movement. Furthermore, it embraced a new emphasis on grassroots organization, the free market, and new communications techniques and technologies. It marketed itself, moreover, with a novel “smooth ‘rational’ image (trading in those Klan bedsheets for business suits).”²²⁶ The New Right, in Morgan’s eyes, had simply harnessed the trademarks of late capitalism in a way that their opponents had not. Similarly, Morgan feared that the New Right possessed a more efficacious engagement with language than did the “women’s libbers.” Every time feminists “use ‘their’ phraseology we are playing into their hands.” Feminists, Morgan reminded her readers, “are pro-choice, not pro-abortion,” while their opponents “are anti-choice, not pro-life (especially not pro-life when they run from one demonstration to another exchanging their fetus-fetishist posters for others reading Bring Back Capital Punishment!).” It was

²²⁵ Faludi, *Backlash*, 230.

²²⁶ This shift in image of the white supremacist movements of the South was most clearly epitomized in the growth of the White Citizens’ Council. See Neil McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (USA: Illini Books, 1994).

“*feminists* who are ‘preserving the family’—by permitting it to redefine and thus revitalize itself, *feminists* who are truly concerned with morals and ethics, *feminists* who have a real politics of love,” who needed to “take back the words!”²²⁷ Morgan, always able to create a deft turn of phrase, clearly recognized the importance of sound bites in modern politics, and the preeminent place of family in this debate. Similarly, journalist Susan Faludi has suggested that the New Right managed to shift the public rhetoric regarding women’s rights into its own language. Indeed, in Faludi’s interpretation, the backlash’s rhetoric “charges feminists with all the crimes [the New Right] perpetrates.”²²⁸ In both Morgan and Faludi’s analyses we see the combination of Jameson’s ideological individualism—the pragmatic focus on the media and language—and more collective utopianism in the focus on the family and the call for a “politics of love.”

The New Right, in Morgan’s estimation, had selected the women’s movement as its prime scapegoat because they recognized “how profound a source for social change feminism is.” Warning her readers in 1979 that “1984 is closer than you think,” Morgan insisted that in the context of the rising tide on the Right, “[c]ertain ‘liberal’ issues turn out to be radical, as we had to learn about the ERA, instructed painfully by the economic reasons behind the Right Wing opposition to it.” *Ms.*, which employed Morgan as a contributing editor at the time, was a similarly “liberal” concern made radical by the conservative climate. In her eyes the magazine embodied a place of public discourse for the varieties of American feminism, but its constituents too often dismissed it “as a handy old shoe to take for granted

²²⁷ Robin Morgan, “Feminism Versus the New Right,” *Sojourner* (January 1979), 6.

²²⁸ Faludi, xviii, xxii.

and carp at, especially since no one can agree with everything in each issue.” This “emphasis on disagreement may prove to be a luxury, and once it’s gone, hindsight will make *Ms.* seem very precious.” *Ms.*, as the most visible mass-circulation feminist magazine, came “under fierce attack from the Right,” which “pressure[d] advertisers, distributors, libraries” and got it “banned and cancelled.”²²⁹

Feminists, therefore, needed to “cease being so damned virtuous (always a ‘feminine’ quality) and dare become *virtuosi*.” This involved an intense engagement with liberal America: not only should feminists write their representatives and advertisers, but also re-examine direct action and coalition-building, support media sympathetic to their cause, and make sure they were registered to vote. This last item, in particular, lay rooted in Morgan’s experience with the New Left’s engagement with the Civil Rights Movement: “some of us remember Mississippi—when you better believe the ballot was considered radical.” Feminist’s engagement with the political process, furthermore, should not stop at voting or endorsing certain candidates: “Consider running yourself. Learn how the ‘inside’ works; we already know how the ‘outside’ works, we were born into it. We’ll need to understand both to survive—and win.” Women outside the movement were “not tired of feminist ideas-only feminist jargon.” To engage them, then, feminists needed to “[t]alk about *feelings*,” and other personal concerns like family, love, sexual assault, and employment.²³⁰ These individualized concerns operated within the same vein as the older consciousness-raising sessions among radical feminists, rooting political ideals in the day-to-day concerns of women living within

²²⁹ Robin Morgan, “Feminism Versus the New Right.”

²³⁰ Ibid.

the patriarchal system. But at the same time, such a rhetorical shift makes clear Morgan's engagement with both cultural feminism and the liberal political process. The anti-intellectualist milieu that the New Right fostered, furthermore, required Morgan to repudiate her own earlier engagement with the specialized jargon of feminist theory.

Where the Morgan of 1970 attempted to distance herself from "Neanderthal" men as much as possible, the Morgan of 1979 suggested that women "[g]ive homework assignments to men who claim to be allies-letter-writing, childcare, typing." These tasks, of course, fell most commonly to women among organizations in the past, both within the New Left and otherwise. Not that Morgan, clearly aware of the dichotomy between liberalism and radicalism that her advice straddled, had lessened her hostility to patriarchy itself. She continued to suggest that feminists "denounce the patriarchal notion of inside and outside partitioning." Instead of focusing on—and arguing about—working inside or outside the system, feminists "need to be lobbying *and* marching, striking by night *and* going on strike by day, writing letters *and* literature, wielding the spray-paint can *and* the artist's brush." Indeed, Morgan opened this article by noting that 1978 would mark the first time women outnumbered men as first-year college students. By 1982, then, when that cohort graduated, these "young women who have entered higher education for feminist reasons (whether or not acknowledged as such)" would have their expectations for post-graduate fulfillment crushed and undergo a "classic radicalizing experience," realizing that educated women formed a part of the "oppressed majority of the general population." Morgan's experience on the New Left and exposure to "new class" theories probably informed this last assertion, as any Old Leftist

would have bristled at the suggestion that the educated few underwent a “classic radicalizing experience.” Oddly, Morgan argued that the numerical majority of women ensured a “lessening of the possibility of violence,” and so women could choose between both the weapons of radicalism and the tools of liberal reform, using “the ballot, the boycott, the street demonstration, etc., with a hitherto unimaginable impact, the impact *of* the majority.”²³¹ From her beginnings as a theorist of the New Left, then, Morgan had moved entirely to an individualized and explicitly middle-class voice.

Calling attention to this shift, does not denigrate Morgan’s changing attitude; rather it helps illuminate her newfound emphasis on the efficacy of progressive struggle *within* the system. As Morgan wrote to a college-aged feminist asking for advice for “choosing... personal-or-political priorities” in 1981, “surely you know that priorities shift according to different times, and it’s important to be able to shift with them—an embittered personal life doesn’t make necessarily for a good revolutionary feminist.” That in mind, Morgan tellingly advised the woman to “watch the tendency to either/or thinking, and keep striving instead for balance, and synthesis.”²³² Morgan, here, continued to try and hold true to the idea that the personal is political, prohibiting a sharp dichotomy between the two, while also invoking their dialectic nature, as well as the fluidity of the idea itself. A true feminist, then, would work toward improving the one by improving the other.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Morgan to Susan C. Davies, 27 March 1981, box C5, folder “Correspondence by Decade: 1970s-1980s D,” Morgan Papers. The rejection of the concept of “either/or,” particularly in regard to intersecting oppressions, was one Morgan borrowed from feminists of color, whether she admitted it or not. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (NY: Routledge, 2000)

Other women at *Ms.* also thought that the magazine overemphasized the personal at the expense of the political. Thom informs us that Mary Peacock, an editor and founding employee of the magazine, thought “that *Ms.* tended to go overboard in presenting individual women as inspirational role models.” As dealing “with a new consciousness in the old world is obviously a painful and confusing situation,” Peacock faulted the magazine for presenting only “storybook things about the brave woman who acts perfectly, politically correctly.” Ellen Willis gave a similar critique of the magazine, doubting that *Ms.* ever offered “as much of a contentious forum for different women’s politics and voices as it could have.” This resulted from both the emphasis on individualism and the normative stance of *Ms.* editors regarding the experiences of white, middle-class women—a tendency not lost on the rare minority women who worked at the magazine. Alice Walker, for example, withdrew her name from the masthead as a contributing editor in 1986, explaining that even while it “was nice to be a *Ms.* cover myself once,” the fact remained that a “people of color cover once or twice a year is not enough” as in “real life, people of color occur with much more frequency.”²³³

According to Thom, Margaret Sloan, an African American and an early writer for the magazine, approached the same problem with an entirely different attitude.²³⁴ Taking the job after Steinem had informed her that she was looking for “a black woman with a consciousness who’s a feminist who can write,” Sloan “challenged her sister staff members,

²³³ See Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 69; Willis quoted on 72; Walker on 89.

²³⁴ Sloan, it is worth noting, later served as the President of the National Black Feminist Organization, and faced a great deal of criticism over her previous association with such the white-centered liberal *Ms.* See Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*, 112, and Michele Wallace’s “On the National Black Feminist Organization” in *Feminist Revolution*.

raising their consciousness ‘by articulating [her] life at that time, just [her] truth.’” The editors removed Sloan from the payroll after two years, but she recalled to Thom that her tenure at the magazine “made it okay for a black woman to pick up the magazine. It might have been dismissed as this white woman thing.”²³⁵ Historian Amy Farrell, conversely, relates an anecdote wherein Sloan missed a deadline for an article on black feminism, after which Pat Carbine wrote her “a terse memo: ‘Margaret, When I consider how little I’ve asked you to do for *Ms.*, I find it maddening to have to read *this*. What happened???’” Sloan’s reply sharply exemplifies the frustration of a woman of color surrounded by white women convinced that gender, not race, served as the prime determinant of oppression. Admitting to having trouble finishing the article, Sloan accused “white women of mak[ing] me feel guilty for not coming along sooner.” At the same time, her mother was facing racial discrimination at work, and she had her child at “a great, good expensive school” that she was willing to “turn tricks to keep her in.” The article, she finished explaining, would not be ready because she was not ready, and perhaps the “white women” were right that they “may be dealing with an irresponsible black woman.”²³⁶ By emphasizing the importance of both a universal femininity and individualized solutions to oppression, *Ms.* haphazardly paved over the concerns of minority women. Sloan, in this document, clearly suffered under this ideological arrangement, and yet she just as obviously believed in the importance of individual choice and liberation.

²³⁵ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 61-62.

²³⁶ Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood*, 93-94.

In her letter of resignation from the magazine, Ellen Willis criticized both the “continual implication that we can liberate ourselves individually by ‘throwing off our conditioning’” and the “mushy, sentimental idea of sisterhood designed to obscure political conflicts between women.” While perhaps overly negative, Willis’s point regarding the tension between these two ideas proves apt. What she failed to state explicitly, though, is that the idea of “sisterhood,” while drawing on communitarian and associative ideals, for the liberal-cultural feminists of *Ms.* implied more a bond between individuals than any kind of collectivity. Because of the idea of universal sisterhood, “[a]nything a woman says or does in the name of feminism is okay; it is unsisterly to criticize or judge; disparities of power, economic privilege, political allegiance are politely glossed over.”²³⁷ Glossed over, but not denied completely: while *Ms.* insisted that a common femininity bound individual women together despite their differences, the magazine still occasionally attempted to acknowledge the different *individual* experiences of minority or working-class women.

Thom, of course, would beg to differ. “Philosophically,” she argues, “*Ms.* was never about individual solutions to sexist oppression.” In her estimation, the magazine had continually argued for the necessity of “institutional and systemic change.” That said, even the ever-supportive Thom, admitted that the “definite editorial bias toward an individual woman’s experience” had “play[ed] against this philosophical stance” as the “personal voice almost always won out over impersonal reporting as a way of exploring issues.”²³⁸

²³⁷ Willis, “The Conservatism of MS.,” 170.

²³⁸ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 80.

Even if we do accept her argument that the magazine had pushed for a political approach to resolving personal issues, the fact remains that these political approaches tended toward a reformist mindset that reflected a normative idea of family and class. Ironically, one of the earliest examples of this came from Johnnie Tillmon, a welfare activist and an African American woman—but also an adept orator aware of the audience she would be reaching in *Ms.* In an article titled “Welfare is a Woman’s Issue,” Tillmon pointed out that the “*families* on A.F.D.C [Aid for Dependent Children] aren’t really families [because] 99 per cent of them are headed by women. That means there is no man around.” Tillmon also took for granted the family life of *Ms.* readers: after asking if they “put down other women for being on welfare,” she tells them to “[s]top for a minute and think what would happen to you and your kids if you suddenly had no husband and no savings.”²³⁹ Tillmon’s savvy in addressing middle class *Ms.* readers represented a more nuanced attack on the magazine’s conflating universal sisterhood into gender commonalities that outranked class or racial differences. At the same time, however, *Ms.* remained one of the few mainstream publications willing to give someone with Tillmon’s message a platform. This was an impressive commitment in the context of the early 1970s, with Nixon in the White House and Reagan the Governor of California. In this period, the national discourse was rapidly shifting from a war on poverty to a war on welfare, with a family-centered attack on “welfare queens” as the dominant spectacle, continuing the widespread politicization of the personal.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Johnnie Tillmon, “Welfare is a Woman’s Issue,” *Ms.*(Spring, 1972), 111, 116.

²⁴⁰ See Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War On Poverty* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2005).

The assertion of the proximity of the personal and the political closely influenced the relationship between feminism and family. *Ms.*, in selling both itself and feminism to middle-class white women, stressed the compatibility of feminism with traditional family models, even while acknowledging the viability of nontraditional models. An early article on a “Utopian Marriage Contract,” for example, includes concessions along the lines of the wife keeping her maiden name or the husband giving “his consent to abortion in advance.”²⁴¹ Such down-to-Earth demands make clear the success of the New Right’s attempt to re-brand the debate in their own terms. The conservative insistence on defending a mythically traditional family forced *Ms.*’s feminist utopia to shift toward the center, relying on more and more pedestrian demands as the ideological parameters of the debate—and the nation—moved toward the Right. However, even then, the magazine insisted on the viability of different familial models, while relying on a normative heterosexual ideal sympathetic to the mainstream middle class.

An August 1978 editorial titled “Who is the Real Family?” began by noting that “[t]hat question invites arguments as heated as any over sex, politics, or religion, complete with analyses of how and why the family is ‘suddenly’ changing. In fact, the one permanent quality about the family is that it *always* has been in a state of perpetual transformation.”²⁴² The “so-called American Family,” the article continued, “was more various than we are led to assume, reflecting exuberantly different racial, ethnic, class, and religious patterns.” Better, then, to celebrate it as “[t]he American Families”—the one common denominator

²⁴¹ Susan Edmiston, “Utopian Marriage Contract,” *Ms.* (Spring 1972), 71.

²⁴² “Who is the Real Family?” *Ms.* (August 1978), 43.

having been a combination of endurance, affection, and resilience.” Resilience because family, in all its forms, not only persists but “in fact proliferates, diversifies, and strengthens,” despite continual “campaigns by ultrarightists to destroy it by narrowly defining it out of existence, and despite their attacks on the Feminist Movement for having energized and supported precisely such familial variety and growth.” Again, in the late 1970s, *Ms.* linked feminism with a liberal opposition to the New Right. While this might seem to lessen feminism’s former focus on opposing the patriarchal structures of liberal society in general, the New Right’s strident embrace of patriarchal “tradition” had already co-opted that side of the debate.

Both sides of the culture war, Left and Right, attempted to harness family as a core value of their campaign. Even as the Right recalled the cultural upheavals of the 1960s to illustrate the necessity of a “return” to the kind of stereotypical “Happy Days” families of the 1950s—exemplified most explicitly in the nostalgic rhetoric used by Ronald Reagan in 1980—*Ms.* relied on a similarly stereotypical view of their opponent. As editor Letty Pogrebin put it in a memo of the late 1970s: “Our kind of kids are the non-robots in my experience. Conformity is a sin of the opposition!!”²⁴³ This opposition of the politics of nostalgia vis-à-vis the politics of nonconformity illustrates yet again the comfortable place that *Ms.* occupied within American society. This was not, after all, a thundering critique of the patriarchal structure that had been in place for millennia, or even a denunciation of liberal

²⁴³ Letty Pogrebin to *Ms.* staff, box S5, folder “Folder Ms. Contributing Editor, 1 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

American society, but more a potshot at those families on the other side of the centrist American political tradition.

Robin Morgan herself sometimes despaired of the compromises that had to be made for *Ms.* to straddle both radicalism and reform. “Whatever happened to ‘the personal is political?’” she asked in one particularly desperate 1980 memo, a piece clearly born of the tensions between the individualistic cultural feminism of *Ms.* and the leftover politics of radical feminism. *Ms.* employees, Morgan asserted, were far too often guilty of having an “offstage” in their lives where “they rear their kids,” and which they explained away by saying “I give my feminism at the office.” Morgan, still championing the idea that the personal and the political must be reflections of one another, could not believe that a fellow *Ms.* staffer would “permit Barbie dolls to reach her daughter” or let a child “wear a King Kong tee-shirt.” Similarly, she did not understand why her compatriots “looked askance upon” those ignoring patriarchal holidays—“as best one can in the eye of the hurricane of liberals rushing to conform”—as if that act “were scroogish at best and really obnoxiously going too far at worst.”²⁴⁴

To Morgan, such lax attitudes in the personal realm could only hurt what *Ms.* was trying to accomplish politically. Such oversights, she believed, were “due to a number of things—primarily laziness, adultism, and a failure of nerves and ethics.” Looking to the difficulty of linking political activism with personal actions in the schema of a late capitalist consumer society, Morgan despaired of the inconsistency she saw around her between the

²⁴⁴ Robin Morgan, “Response to Mary Crawford’s ‘Feminist Families,’” 19 January 1980, box S6, folder “Folder Ms. Contributing Editor, 1 of 2,” Morgan Papers.

political and personal structures of her compatriots. She insisted that child-rearing should be a locus between those two concerns, and called the other women at *Ms.* to task for their lapses in this regard:

“It takes TIME and enormous and continual and ceaseless EFFORT to confront these things, to dare examine and reevaluate each detail, from language to teeshirts to holidays, with care, to raise the issues, to discuss them ENDLESSLY, not in a little cute struggle session now-and-then but through-composed in daily inhaling and exhaling. Passionately. Exhaustively. Socratically [sic]—so that it isn’t lecturing or propaganda, but true consciousness-raising for both the adult and child. To do this for years.²⁴⁵

Again, consciousness-raising sat at the heart of Morgan’s feminist concerns, relating the affairs of day-to-day life with the more abstract concerns of the political realm. Equally important, relating to Morgan’s charges of “adultism,” education required “deep and non-lip-service-rhetoric RESPECT for the person who is the child” and “assuming the best about that person, not the worst.” Just as feminism called for women to have the respect due to them as human beings, Morgan insisted that adults owed children the same. Feminist parents who “talk anti-racism but concede King Kong t-shirts [or] talk feminism but permit Barbie dolls,” or, even worse, allowed themselves “King Kong or Barbie themes” in their own lives, exposed their own rhetoric as “bullshit—or even worse... preaching.²⁴⁵ Morgan’s ideology regarding child-rearing was closely related to the larger schema of feminism: recognizing the common humanity and necessary dignity for a group traditionally denied both, and living one’s personal life as if the political structure had already been changed and utopian goals achieved.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

To Morgan, this kind of hypocrisy, stood in the way of personal politics, which necessarily entailed a more critical stance toward consumerist mass culture, fixated on “football and Halloween witches and guns” and other such “asinine pursuits.” Referring to the normative consensus assumption that outsider ideologies were somehow “off,” Morgan noted that suspicion of the “so-called purity” of feminist families assumed that the present society was “healthy” or natural and that those who challenged it “must be sick, repressed, weird, or fascistic.” In spite of this popular uneasiness, Morgan closely linked political rebellion to cultural expression outside of the whitebread norm: “Why oh why is ‘tolerance’ something radicals are supposed to engage in, thus leaving the field free for liberal idiocy?” Her preferred means of expression, though, more closely reflected traditional high culture than the counterculture of the 1960s. To Morgan, “loving Bach is what’s normal; I pity kids who aren’t exposed to him,” while “kids who don’t know anything about… Mozart or Emily Bronte are… being repressed and denied—they will surely turn out to be ‘sickies’!” Indeed, Morgan saw mainstream culture as “rather diseased,” and giving a child “an inoculation” against it as “imperative to her or his health, life, very existence.” A cultural inoculation of this sort meant “daring to not conform, not just talking about non-conformity.” Rather than letting children “plug” themselves “into cartoons on tv for a few more blessedly sleepy hours,” parents needed to engage their kids “for a talk or a game or chess or reading together aloud or going to a museum or movie (adult) or play or concert or watching good drama on tv.” Having engaged in this cultural consumption, families should then work at “TALKING

ABOUT IT, analyzing it, comparing reactions and laughing over them.” “For once,” she ended her plea, “could we please challenge our readers and not underestimate them?”²⁴⁶

Nowhere in this essay did Morgan address class concerns or the larger structure of capitalism, and yet she explicitly still considered herself a radical, often at odds with liberal conformists. This document provides a perfect signifier of Morgan’s evolving views regarding the personal as the political—after all, whatever happened to that idea? Radicalism, in this context, denoted a critique not of the system as a whole, but of the way that individuals live their lives within that system—their choices in shirts and music and other cultural capital. To Morgan and the other *Ms.* feminists, individuals, while influenced by the political climate, nonetheless possessed the agency to construct their own narratives. Moreover, her nod to the increasing political influence of the New Right helps to explain the personal arc of people sharing her mindset, who came to believe, one could say, that the political is personal.

Kate Ellis, a well-known member of the second wave, wrote to Morgan in May of 1979 with a similar approach to personal politics. Ellis reported to Morgan that while attending a recent scholarly feminist conference she had been struck by “the number of people who were wearing lipstick, nail polish, high heels, satin weskits and/or ankle socks.” The effect was such that those women who were without such fashionable accessories “found ourselves seriously thinking about going shopping soon.” To Ellis, this reflected “some deep and puzzling changes going on in the movement.” After all, “[i]f being a feminist in the late

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

seventies doesn't mean wearing army fatigues, what does it mean?" While it remains impossible to judge the effect of *Ms.* on this widespread transition, one has to wonder if the onslaught of pseudo-feminist advertising contained within its pages had some effect on the transition of feminism from a movement of student activists dressed in countercultural uniforms to one of women decked out with the latest fashion accoutrements. Ellis, like Morgan, attached a great deal of political significance to such personal choices as clothing and accoutrement. In so doing, both participated in linking individual growth or failure with personal presentation and spectacle—and, it must be noted, a consumer-oriented aspect—implicitly accepting of the hegemony of late capitalism. Unlike Morgan, though, Ellis linked this shift to a hyper-individualized consumer feminism with the class biases of *Ms.* Referencing the blue-collar housewife from the sitcom *All in the Family*, Ellis described the readers of the magazine as "the self-satisfied 'us' for whom the Edith Bunkers of the world are a 'them.'"²⁴⁷

Ellis also pointed out that *Ms.*, by targeting middle-class housewives, shared an audience with *Cosmopolitan*, a more traditional women's magazine. Ellis admitted that as a feminist she "used to take a principalled [sic] stand on not reading *Cosmopolitan*," meaning that she "read it furtively and not very often." During a recent perusal, however, she had "read an article on surviving rejection (male rejection that is to say) that did for me exactly what CR groups were supposed to do, and did do for me in times past: told me I was not alone in this experience." At the same time, a similar recent article in *Ms.* had given Ellis a

²⁴⁷ Kate Ellis to Morgan, 4 May 1979, box S6, folder "Folder Ms. Contributing Editor, 1 of 2," Morgan Papers.

“feminist perspective...that Cosmo could not have given to me.” In sum, Ellis “needed to know it was ok to say ‘fuck it’ and I needed to know it was okay to keep trying... the domains of Cosmo and Ms. are still separated, but not by much. Nor is the difference a simple matter of feminism here and no feminism there.” Indeed, she suggested sarcastically that perhaps *Ms.* should try to “appropriate” as an audience “women who try to look like the cover of Cosmo.” Ellis opposed this shift not because it was “wrong” so much as the fact “that sisterhood has been upstaged by an embarrassingly blatant opportunism.”²⁴⁸ While Ellis recognized some form of feminism at work within the pages of *Cosmo*, she still believed that *Ms.* possessed a stronger and less commodified link to the second wave, based on its origins and the participation of people like Robin Morgan and Ellen Willis.

That said, *Ms.*, radical roots or no, relied on advertising for much of its revenue. Unlike other magazines, however, the editors of *Ms.* wished to “reform” the advertising industry, using *Ms.*’ selling power to reward progressive feminist concerns while denying business to those campaigns that continued to espouse a chauvinistically male perspective. This model of advertising, of necessity, tied in closely with *Ms.*’s focus on the cultural feminism of the individual housewife. Yet the combination of a nominally radical ideology fitted to the structural concerns of running a business within a capitalist framework led to some bizarre compromises on the part of the editors.

Morgan, whose ties to radical feminism perhaps left her more apt to notice these tensions, quite frankly called out the magazine for some of these compromises—even if she

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

rarely seemed to display much in the way of self-reflection about her own. One self-proclaimed “memo of protest, depression, chagrin, and misery” described an ad that Morgan insisted “makes me want to die, especially since I’ve committed myself to heavy promo on the issue.”²⁴⁹ The compromises involved in selling radicalism clearly weighed heavily on Morgan at the least—if not on the rest of the staff. The ad in question, on the back cover of the August 1978 issue, promoted Wolfschmidt vodka, and featured the tagline “The Spirit of the Czar lives on,” over a picture of the czar, vodka in one hand, a woman on the other arm. Morgan decried the fact that this advertisement “would be bad enough inside” the magazine, but on the back cover, “in all its reactionary glory,” it was that much worse, evoking “tyranny, machismo, and the good old days... when a man’s woman was barely indiscernible from his wolfhound—both bathed in the glow of his fireside and radiant honcho personality.” The ad could be first in a series, she caustically suggested, continuing with:

“The spirit of the Furer [sic] lives on... drink schnapps.
The Spirit of Il Duce endures... quaff some Strega tonight.
The Ghost of Generalissimo Franco still rises... for a glass of sangria.
Joe McCarthy and Irish whiskey?
Idi Amin and Black and White Scotch?
Papa Doc and Pina Coladas?”

She vowed to “write Wolfschmidt a protest as an individual,” but asked the staff not to repeat their mistake. Morgan insisted that she could only “groan inwardly when I think of facing feminists (and progressive people in general) while waving this issue—even carefully held to hide the back.” This impassioned plea, however, appears not to have been enough to make

²⁴⁹ Morgan to the Advertising Dept., 5 July 1978, box S6 , folder “Subject Files: *Ms.* General, 1970s-1980s,” Morgan Papers.

Ms. cancel the Wolfschmidt run: the same ad appeared on the inside cover of the October 1978 issue.²⁵⁰

The postscript to this rant, however, represents the other side of the *Ms.* advertising spectrum. Noting that Mitchum's antiperspirant's television commercials had been "decidedly feminist of late," and describing one which "follow[ed] a women to work on an airplane, setting us up for her to be a stewardess, then springing her on us in the pilot's seat," Morgan inquired as to whether the magazine had been pursuing Mitchum as a potential advertiser. This, of course, formed the most explicit point of *Ms.*'s plans to utilize capitalism against itself: to reward businesses that replaced the usual misogynistic advertising fare with more equitable stuff by pursuing their ad revenue for the magazine. In actuality, though, the ads reflected very little radical feminist content, typically just replacing pictures of men with women or pushing products designed to "improve" the life of the middle-class housewife. The latter reflected the tendency of the advertising industry to co-opt the newly popular rhetoric of women's liberation—most infamously in the Virginia Slims cigarette campaign centered around the slogan "You've Come a Long Way, Baby."²⁵¹ Less infamous examples abound: the September 1978 issue, to take one, contains an ad for United Airlines whose headline reads "Rest easy, you're among friends," over text describing in the second person the events of "another business trip." The text, however, is non-gender-specific—"You're not just another person on another business trip"—while the pictures ringing the text are of a

²⁵⁰ *Ms.* (October 1978).

²⁵¹ See Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 311.

smartly dressed businesswoman availing herself of “the friendly skies.”²⁵² Four pages later, a woman in fatigues operates a complicated-looking piece of communication machinery under the banner “The Army Reserve. Part of What You Earn is Pride.”²⁵³ It is hard to imagine that gaining women a place in the Army Reserve ranked very highly among the concerns of early second-wave activists. While constructing a seemingly feminist narrative, these more “positive” advertisements simultaneously commodified it and used it to push a product, or, in the second example, the liberal nation-state itself.

Advertising always presented a problematic area for the progressive capitalists of *Ms.* The magazine sought to maintain a “fair and aesthetic” balance of “advertisements to editorials,” to select advertising “that accurately reflects the way women spend our hard-won consumer dollars” and treated “women as people,” while avoiding those it deemed “downright insulting” or “harmful.” Internally, editors would train “advertising sales people who themselves would be agents of change,” spreading the gospel of hip and socially transformative business practices.²⁵⁴ Furthermore, the editors attempted to move their publication out of the ghetto of women’s special interest rates, historically much lower than those charged by other niche magazines. Supporting the insistence of the advertising department on higher advertising prices, Thom claimed that the preview issue of *Ms.* generated 26,000 subscription orders, while “more than 20,000 readers wrote letters in response to the issue,” an “astonishing number” when viewed in light of the issue’s

²⁵² *Ms.* (September 1978), 5.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵⁴ “Everything You Wanted To Know About Advertising and Were Not Afraid to Ask-Personal Report from *Ms.*,” *Ms.* (November 1974), 56-59

distribution of 300,000 copies. To drive this point home, Thom referenced publisher Carbine's insistence that a typical issue of *McCall's*, which had a circulation of 7 million, "drew perhaps 200 letters."²⁵⁵ Numerically, then, the advertising saleswomen of *Ms.* had a strong case to make.

The editors' attempt to charge higher rates also drew, strikingly, on their class bias. Carbine, again, relied on the mail response from the preview issue to know "that the *Ms.* reader, in demographic profile, was going to look like the women who read *Esquire* and *Psychology Today*." These women "would have a considerable individual and family income [and] be highly educated" and were well worth the price "that advertisers were paying to reach the upscale audiences of those magazines."²⁵⁶ *Ms.* saleswomen, Thom remembered, made the argument "that there was a trend-setting, decisive, feminist woman who could be reached uniquely through *Ms.*" and who were "not likely to read other women's publications." Again, this combination of upscale affluence and progressive female independence tied in to the idea of selective consumer-oriented living as radicalism. The *Ms.* woman, after all, escaped the patriarchy by being "ready to make decisions about how she spent her money—on major purchases such as automobiles and life insurance as well as the smaller personal and household products that the industry always assumed to be within a woman's province."²⁵⁷ By using this—the choice to spend money not only on household products, but also on automobiles and life insurance—to prove the efficacy of the *Ms.* social

²⁵⁵ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 24.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 37.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 118.

movement, Thom pointed to the utmost importance of individual fulfillment in this brand of feminism.

It is hard to overlook such implicit economic biases, and Ellen Willis, probably the most prominent member of the second wave to associate herself with *Ms.* other than Morgan herself, clearly saw the problematic relationship between the magazine, radicalism, and class. Willis worked for the magazine in its earliest years, and acrimoniously left in 1975. Her letter of resignation, which she later published in the feminist journal *off our backs*, stressed the dichotomy between “women’s movement” types and “women’s magazine types” within the organization. Willis opened by noting that she had been wary of her “role as a token radical” on the staff, but also “excited by the idea of a mass circulation feminist magazine.” While not expecting the magazine, “of necessity an expensive commercial venture,” to act as a “spearhead of radicalism,” Willis had hoped that it would at least be “a genuinely liberal forum for women writers who could not express themselves freely in male-controlled publications.” Even the radical Willis recognized the usefulness of liberalism where radicalism was impossible, or at least impractical.

In her actual experience, however, *Ms.*’ editorial content instead “function[ed] primarily as propaganda for the political interests of its organizational network and allies,” and existed “not to be a forum but to promote a specific ideology.” Willis argued that the magazine had a “[p]ervasive class bias” which took “upper-middle-class privileges and values for granted.” Within the magazine, the “concerns of non-affluent/educated/‘successful’ women are generally either ignored or written about in a ‘we,

the real people, are reporting on the natives' tone.”²⁵⁸ By replacing the ideal of the “sexy chick or the perfect homemaker” with that of the “liberated woman,” *Ms.* misrepresented feminism as fantasy, an act which “misleads some women, convinces others that ‘women’s lib’ has nothing to do with them, and plays into the hands of those who oppose any real change in women’s condition.” In Willis’ estimation, *Ms.* had just replaced one utopian personal ideal with another, neither of which necessitated any kind of radical organizing: women “don’t need to fight men, only our conditioning” and “don’t need to attack the economic system,” because “we too can make it.” To this feminist, the movement had come to embrace the mainstream “American Assumption” of rugged individualism—economic success or failure rested, in the final analysis, on the individual. At bottom, then, the magazine’s “self-improvement, individual-liberation philosophy” spoke only to “an elite,” rendering it “an updated women’s magazine fantasy.”²⁵⁹ This description is easily expanded to a critique of cultural feminism in general, with the consumption of commodities easily substituted for personal growth in such an image- and presentation-obsessed culture as late capitalist America.

The most obvious answer to these charges, of course, is that *Ms.* was a business that had to compete in the marketplace. Thom, indeed, argued that what critics perceived as an unfair class bias was “complicated by the fact that most advertisements in *Ms.*... were directed at an upscale audience. The demographics of *Ms.* readers, their level of income and education, attracted that kind of advertising.” Disagreeing with Willis, Thom noted that while

²⁵⁸ Ellen Willis, “The Conservatism of MS.” in *Feminist Revolution*, Redstockings, 1978. Pg 170.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 171.

the titles of many of the articles featuring “nonaffluent women” made a “point of the women’s blue-collar (or ‘pink’ collar) occupations, thus perhaps signaling that the reader was entering an unfamiliar world,” the articles themselves were “not condescending in tone; they respect the women’s words and concerns.”²⁶⁰

To take one example, a 1973 interest piece on Barbara Mikulski, a blue-collar politician from Baltimore, did illuminate her different class station without being condescending.²⁶¹ The article explained that Mikulski, as a feminist, provided a crucial link between the second wave and the “masses of lower-middle-class women with a high school education or less,” who “were reared conventionally to be wives and mothers; women who have few choices, and to whom ‘self-actualization’ means little,” and whose husbands worked blue collar jobs—or worked them themselves. As Mikulski herself put it, the “media have pictured us in the past as sort of Rosie-the-Riveter types, or like the wife in ‘Joe.’ You wore tacky clothes, liked plastic flowers, read *True Confessions...* and you had an I.Q. of 47. And yet our women aren’t like that at all.”²⁶² The magazine had to strike a delicate balance in its dealings with class, and, much like their dealings with both race and politics, rarely managed to satisfy their entire audience. Here, for example, even while examining Mikulski in a sympathetic light, *Ms.* implicitly assumed the necessity of a bridge between the distinct groups of feminists—implicitly middle class—and working-class women. At the same time,

²⁶⁰ Thom, *Inside Ms.*, 80.

²⁶¹ Mikulski, it is worth noting, rode the working-class backlash of white ethnics to election as one of Maryland’s senators, but as a Democrat.

²⁶² Nancy Seifer, “Barbara Mikulski and the Blue-Collar Woman,” *Ms.* (November 1973), 71.

we see here again an example of *Ms.* addressing larger issues by focusing on the experiences of an individual.

Both Ellen Willis and Robin Morgan attempted to adapt their radicalism to the liberalist approach of *Ms.*, but their efforts took them down vastly different paths. Morgan, with her insistence on a more personalized radicalism and shift to a liberal reformism, associated herself more closely with post-New Left cultural feminism. Willis, on the other hand, tried and failed to align the magazine with an increasingly political brand of radical feminism, and moved away from the idea of reconciliation with liberal reformism. The two were not unaware of this competition. Willis complained of one Morgan article, for example, that epitomized the “anti-left line” of *Ms.*’s cultural feminism by painting “radicals as bitter, divisive and defeatist,” even as it “praise[d] liberals as optimistic and effective.”²⁶³ The larger political context, however, combined with the rise of cultural feminism to play an important role in these differing opinions. Morgan, having recognized the importance of coalition building to oppose the New Right, had adapted her tactics accordingly.

Ironically, the New Right shared with cultural feminism a novel emphasis on the free market individual. Capitalism, of course, requires expansion to new markets to survive, and it has been suggested that one of the hallmarks of late capitalism is the expansion of the market dynamic into spheres of life it had formerly failed to reach, including the unconscious, the third world, and, I would suggest, oppositional social movements. The late 20th century saw not only the wholesale commodification of both the counterculture of the 1960s and

²⁶³ Willis, “The Conservatism of MS.,” 171.

feminism, but also the explosion of free market rhetoric on the Right. Where the Old Right had often decried the effect of the free market on the traditional family and community, the Cold War and the rise of the New Right brought a stringently pro-capitalist view to the American Right.²⁶⁴ Ironically, perhaps, the post-war conservatives also differed from their predecessors in the number of women activists pushing their cause.²⁶⁵

Ms., meanwhile, presents an uncommonly explicit example of a social movement attempting to utilize a capitalistic enterprise to bring about some form of progressive change. Unfortunately, this reliance on capitalism and the larger shift from radical feminism to cultural feminism in the pages of the magazine combined to produce an espousal of an overly individualized form of the politics of possibility. In doing so, *Ms.* did promote a positive image of the ability of women to enact change and progression, but only within their own lives—and only for some women. By accenting change only for the individual, *Ms.* tended to ignore the problems caused by race, class, and sexuality in the lives of women. This made it tragically easy for the editors, most of whom were relatively affluent, heterosexual white women, to present feminism as a change enacted through commodities and lifestyle choices. By the late 1970s, having relegated fundamental change to the realm of unrealistic—and perhaps even undesired—utopia, the feminists of *Ms.* affirmed the current liberal order, and

²⁶⁴ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, just before her complete embrace of conservatism, dismissed the New Right as closeted “Free-market liberals” who had “identified themselves [contra traditional conservatives] as uncompromising defenders of individualism.” *Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 260. For the influence of Ayn Rand’s market-obsessed objectivist philosophy on this shift, see Paul Lyons, *New Left, New Right and the Legacy of the Sixties*, 66–67.

²⁶⁵ See Rebecca Klatch, “Coalition and Conflict Among Women of the New Right,” *Signs*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer, 1988), and McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*.

devoted the pages of the magazine instead to opposing the most dangerous ideologues of the patriarchy: the rising New Right.

CONCLUSION

“Whatever the intellectual does, is wrong. He experiences drastically and vitally the ignominious choice that late capitalism secretly presents to all its dependants: to become one more grown-up, or to remain a child.”²⁶⁶

— Theodor Adorno

By the end of the twentieth century, the New Right had succeeded in conflating capitalism and freedom in the dominant rhetoric of the nation—another example of its ability to use rhetoric to dominate the nation politically and economically. Furthermore, its proponents would not typically refer to capitalism as such, preferring globalization, laissez-faire, free or open markets, or just freedom itself instead. Moreover, despite the Left’s best efforts, the Right has continued to enhance its power by castigating the movements of the 1960s and 1970s—particularly the New Left and the second wave—as the cause of everything wrong with American society. Republican presidential nominees, beginning with Richard Nixon, have often ridden this uncertainty into office by successfully casting these oppositional movements as the enemies of the American public. Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980, however, marked the apex of this masterful blend of dissatisfaction and nostalgia for the “happy days” that preceded the radical Left’s historical interventions. Indeed, revulsion for the Sixties has become a prime way for the hegemonic elements of the system to reaffirm their structural place—and the rightness of the system itself. By rejecting the legitimacy of the New Left, Black Power and the second wave of feminism, conservatives could reject by extension any related critiques of late capitalism.

²⁶⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: NLB, 1974), 133.

Both the New Left and the New Right increasingly emphasized the individual, but the latter merged this focus with a coherent, moral-religious worldview, tapping into the political power of the silent majority. The Left's focus on personal authenticity, in fact, has fostered a tendency toward relativism, a weak rhetorical counter-argument to the Right's clear-cut vision of good and evil.²⁶⁷ At the same time, late capitalism's co-optation of the cultural expressions of oppositional movements, combined with the system's ability to amend itself just enough to dissuade dissent, has continually undermined the growth of radicalism in the United States.

This, in turn, has opened the way for the GOP's embrace of a new kind of pro-capitalist populism, relying on popular mistrust of social permissiveness and yearning for stability to court a plurality. As conservative Robert Whitaker pointed out in 1982, this "emerging Republican majority" still consisted mostly of the traditional Right partisans, but now bolstered by defectors from the Democrats, including the former Dixiecrats and some of the blue-collar workers of the North.²⁶⁸ The misdirection of rugged individualism, a co-optation of the Left's focus on the interrelationship between the personal and the political, has become the canvas of the Right-wing propaganda machine in late capitalist America. At the same time, portraying the Left both as enfeebled *and* a threatening bogeyman affords the Right the rhetorical space to wage a never-ending battle. Indeed, both sides in the culture

²⁶⁷ Thomas Frank has made a career out of exploring this difference. See, in particular, his *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004); and *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008).

²⁶⁸ Robert W. Whitaker, *The New Right Papers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), ix.

wars of the late twentieth century have continually linked the personal to the political, dragging personal matters like abortion, marriage, and education into the public realm.

Yet it would be a mistake to judge these expressions of middle-class radicalism as entirely ineffectual. All drew attention to unequal power dynamics in the United States, and in the spectacle-obsessed culture of late capitalism, as they say, any publicity is good publicity. The key issue revolves around each movement's awareness of—and attempted resistance to—not only the growing power of the Right, but to the machinations of late capitalism itself. The student movement of the New Left, which espoused the most emphatic rejection of the consumer culture, became instead the most readily co-opted. Clearly, the relationship between these radicals and late capitalism was a more complex one than they had admitted or articulated. As some activists realized, usually after their numbers had precipitously declined, the answer lay not in outright rejection, but in a form of inverted co-optation. Ironically, perhaps, as the mass culture adopted many of these students' preferred cultural expressions, enshrining the image of this generation as an example for contemporary students to consume rather than emulate, it jettisoned much of their politics.

Recognizing the American preference for rugged individualism over Marxism, some radical movements endeavored to collaborate with late capitalism to work toward equality within the system. The Civil Rights Movement and the women's movement exemplified this shift most positively. Within these struggles, the American Left's middle-class iterations propagated utopian progress by attaching it to individualist ideals in the context of larger group dynamics. As the examples of Soul City and *Ms.* show, however, simply combining

the two ideals of radicalism and individualism rarely proved sufficient. Floyd McKissick, after all, had to rely on the federal government to fund his black capitalist utopia—which proved a fatal mistake. Despite this error, McKissick possessed the most intuitive understanding of this era. He played to the contradictions of late capitalism—individualism and communitarianism, suburban and urban landscapes, utopia and dystopia—and the growing importance of spatial restructuring in the market to improve the lives of the dispossessed of the nation. Even so, the erasure of McKissick’s efforts from mainstream memories of the Civil Rights Movement—and even of Black Power—indicates the tensions inherent in the processes of inverted co-optation. Beyond signaling late capitalism’s commodification of the civil rights era, Soul City’s absence in the broader story marks the Right’s presence. The complexity of McKissick and his vision do not fit easily within the narrative of “good” versus “evil” upon which the Right depends to explain, and even celebrate, this past.

Ms., meanwhile, symbolized the second wave’s move from an anti-capitalist politics toward the promotion of the rights of white middle-class women. In doing so, the magazine most explicitly promoted the ability of individuals to enact change within their own lives. With this more limited objective, it was, arguably, the most successful of all three of these movements, prompting the largest backlash from the Right. Although free of the dependence on the state that had so crippled McKissick’s efforts, the liberalized second wave embraced change enacted through commodities and lifestyle choices, and turned a blind eye toward larger problems caused by group differences. By the late 1970s, having witnessed the rise of

the New Right, the editors of *Ms.* understood the danger that the GOP posed—but not, apparently, that of late capitalism itself. Aware of the importance of discourse in the culture war, the editors of *Ms.* attempted to broaden the definition of family to include both more communal sensibilities and alternative lifestyles. The conservative movement, however, proved more successful in defining family down to a more “traditional” unit. Again, the branding of debates provides an important example of the hegemonic abilities of the Right; in this, at least, Morgan was right. Where many commonly dismiss the Left’s attention to language as “political correctness,” or an overly academic attention to meaningless details, the similar determination of the Right to conflate capitalism and freedom—for example in the ways rebranding of abortion stances from anti-choice to “pro-life” reinforced the emphasis on individual agency—tend to be accepted in common discourse without question.

Indeed, the very title of “conservative” represents a matter of branding with the New Right. To the extent that they have relied on the image of a “radical” or “oppositional” movement co-opted from the Left to define their position, the New Right has depended much more stridently on the notion that their conservative movement reflects ideals stretching back to the founding of the nation. The New Right distinguished itself from the Old by emphasizing the free market and a willingness to accept interference from the state to fight communism and promote capitalism, in addition to their devotion to individualized personal politics. Indeed, when Alan Crawford, an Old Right partisan, set out to describe the more novel version’s failures, he compared his mission to that “responsibility of liberals to expose

the radicals... who operate in or try to infiltrate their ranks.”²⁶⁹ The bitter irony, then, is that the New Right, in claiming the conservative label, has obscured the true meaning of the word, opting instead to devote themselves to such a novelty-fetishizing system as late capitalism, with its planned obsolescence and ever-present need for expansion and innovation.

The New Left and its descendants did have a profound effect on the New Right, as both existed in a dialectical relationship of cause and effect, hegemony and counter-hegemony, co-optation and inverted co-optation. If the New Right borrowed the identification of the personal with the political, and the related emphasis on language and rhetoric, from the New Left, such identity politics have mirrored the shift from community to individual in late capitalism for both. Moreover, as the utopia-oriented era of the 1960s ebbed, the idea of personal politics shifted. Instead of living one’s life as if the revolution had already occurred, this idea became a means of emphasizing personal opportunity within liberal politics. A successful oppositional politics, then, needs to maintain the focus on the personal as an outgrowth and reflection of the political, without losing track of either. Dropping the attention to a radical materialist politics, these movements of the radical middle class overemphasized the role of personal aspects within social and cultural realms, thereby resituating the debate on a plane of action in which the Right owned much of the means of production and promulgation. The mistake, therefore, lay in the emphasis on the personal without the traditional class-based politics. In the end, the dialectic of co-optation allowed

²⁶⁹ Alan Crawford, *Thunder On the Right: The “New Right” and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Random House, 1980), xvi.

both the system and oppositional movements to redirect the strength of their opponents. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the system proved more resilient than did movements based on individuals, and continually strengthened its permissive and hegemonic relationship to countercultures.

For those movements on the Left that embraced such individualized radicalism, activism meant either failure, or success in improving the lives of those most like themselves. SDS, for example, managed to shake things up for the lives of white students and help to end the war in Vietnam, but their ERAP projects, a noble attempt to bring change into the lives of others, failed miserably. Likewise *Ms.* and its associated liberal feminism managed to improve the quality of life for some middle-class white women, but only by pretending that “universal sisterhood” outweighed the problems faced by women of color and women of the lower classes. Floyd McKissick’s Soul City program, the movement the most explicitly concerned with the creation of a utopia, also remained the one most oriented toward helping those outside of the middle class. Although the hegemonic power of late capitalism has seemingly rendered widespread radicalism in America a utopian impossibility, McKissick’s insights might assist any kind of resurgence on the Left. Indeed, the importance of earlier radical movements of the middle class for later Leftists lies not in the replacement of class concerns by social ones, or the half-hearted combination of the two. Instead, an American Left must focus simultaneously on economic, social, *and* cultural inequalities as root-level concerns, while conceding culture itself as a terrain of struggle in which the radical power of individuals acting in concert might be realized *despite* the dangers and complications of

commodification and co-optation.²⁷⁰ The ongoing struggle with late capitalism, therefore, necessitates the continual reformulation of a Left politics that is both utopian in its call for communitarianism and pragmatic in its allowances for individualism.

²⁷⁰ For more on the necessity of cultural struggles for the Left, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); and *Yo' Mama's Disfunctional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban American* (USA: Beacon Press, 1997).

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