

{essays in history}

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Making the New Right From Above and Below



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Reviewed Work(s)

Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle over Equality after the Civil Rights Revolution. By Dennis Deslippe. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012). xiv + 282 pp. Cloth, \$55.00.

The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression. By Angus Burgin. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). 303 pp. Cloth, \$29.95.

A recent *New York Times* article notes the blossoming interest in the history of American capitalism among historians, university presses, and undergraduates in the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown. In particular, the deregulation of the American economy over the last thirty-plus years has drawn significant attention from scholars seeking to better understand and explain the relationship between capitalism and democracy in a post-industrial American economy.^[1] Social historians have also looked to the period since the 1970s to chart the concurrent origins and evolutions of modern conservatism.^[2] The two titles reviewed for this essay belong to both historiographical trends, and each work offers vital contributions to them. Each author presents a history of opposition—to affirmative action and to Keynesianism—characterized more by uncertainty than the calcified partisanship of their more recent advocates, thereby challenging conventional narratives of each account. Together, these two works raise complex questions about the relationship between two seemingly unrelated issues—neoliberalism and affirmative action.

Dennis Deslippe's *Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle over Equality after the Civil Rights Revolution* examines the longer history of affirmative-action resistance in the decade and a half prior to the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision of 1978. Affirmative-action opponents won their first major legal victory with *Bakke*, in which the Supreme Court, while upholding the validity of race conscious admissions policies, deemed the University of California, Davis' affirmative-action program unconstitutional. Yet, according to Deslippe, beginning the narrative of affirmative-action opposition with *Bakke* elides "the longer, more varied history of affirmative action in the nearly fifteen years before *Bakke*" (3). Opposition to affirmative action originated as much in faculty clubs as it did on the assembly line, and among liberals and conservatives alike. A more extended examination of affirmative-action opposition includes a nearly identical Supreme Court case four years prior to *Bakke* and a history of grassroots resistance spawned in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Right's Act of

1964 and stretched across class and political boundaries. In so doing, Deslippe contests the notion that affirmative-action opposition came exclusively from white backlash “hard hats” fed up with civil rights programs.[3] In fact, self-professed liberals dominated affirmative action opposition in its first decade.

Affirmative-action opposition, according to Deslippe, arose from three sources: “labor unionism,” “colorblind liberalism,” and “colorblind conservatism.” Part I of the book outlines the first two. Labor unions and organizations like the American Jewish Congress led the opposition to affirmative action in its early years. While some unions outright opposed “equal opportunity” and even resorted to violence to prevent implementation of affirmative-action programs, the vast majority of unions supported “soft” affirmative-action measures that included recruiting and training programs for minority applicants. What unions opposed were “hard” affirmative action policies that set aside a certain amount of jobs for minority candidates, especially when these quotas jeopardized seniority laws of “last hired, first fired.” Union opposition to affirmative action solidified as the seventies unfolded and the nation slipped into recession, leaving an expanding workforce to compete for a dwindling number of jobs. As Deslippe notes, “if affirmative action in the 1960s focused on who should be hired, in the challenging economy of the 1970s it tended to deal with who should be fired” (48).

Similarly, Jewish and professorial organizations overwhelmingly supported “soft” affirmative-action policies in higher education that recruited, tutored, and provided financial aid for minority students, but drew upon the historic use of quotas to keep Jews and Catholics out of American colleges to oppose “hard” affirmative-action policies in admissions and faculty hiring. Such policies, they argued, compromised the inherent colorblind meritocracy of higher education and threatened their position in higher education. Part II of the book centers around two case studies of largely unsuccessful legal challenges to “hard” affirmative-action policies that nonetheless laid the groundwork for the more successful conservative mobilization against “reverse discrimination” that began in the latter half of the 1970s. In *DeFunis v. Odegaard* (1974), the Supreme Court took on its first “reverse discrimination case” involving a twice-rejected white law school applicant who sued the University of Washington for admitting several black students with

inferior test scores. Were it not for a technicality, Marco DeFunis, not Allan Bakke, would likely be the affirmative-action opposition's Founding Father. Deslippe's second case study takes up the "reverse discrimination" protests of the Detroit Police Department in the early 1970s.

The *DeFunis* chapter and Deslippe's attentive and nuanced presentation of labor's opposition to affirmative action are the real strengths of this volume. Moreover, Deslippe's tripartite classification of affirmative-action opposition that stretched across class and political lines contributes important insights into a larger trend in New Right social history of complicating the conventional "backlash" narrative that confined affirmative-action opposition exclusively to bigoted neoconservatives.^[4] Yet, Deslippe's analysis of the role of race in shaping affirmative-action opposition lacks the same nuance that marks most of his work. Deslippe disputes whiteness scholars like George Lipsitz who dismiss affirmative-action "opponents as simply agents of 'whiteness' or defenders of masculine privilege."^[5] Instead, he characterizes the colorblind and labor liberals who opposed "hard" affirmative action as people who "understood the seriousness of discrimination's effects and sought to find an alternative to existing affirmative action policies" in line with their genuine commitment to colorblind meritocracy. Yet, as he acknowledges, opponents directed their attacks on affirmative action exclusively toward African Americans, only one of the many groups, including women, who qualified for affirmative action considerations. By taking liberal affirmative-action opponents at their word, Deslippe misses an opportunity to engage "whiteness studies" more thoroughly. As Lipsitz argues, white supremacy is less about explicit declarations of bigotry than "a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility."^[6] While supportive of "soft" affirmative action, the labor and colorblind liberals Deslippe identifies nonetheless sought to protect their privileges in the form seniority laws and hiring practices, which is, in fact, the essence of Lipsitz's notion of "the possessive investment in whiteness." Nonetheless, Deslippe's work is an important contribution to our understanding of the manner in which opposition to civil rights legislation in the 1970s extended beyond reactionary conservatives.

Midway between the *DeFunis* and *Bakke* cases, Milton Friedman won the Nobel Prize in Economics. The "neoliberal" philosophy he espoused,

built upon the conviction that the free market, not government, provides the only guarantor of freedom, moved from the academic fringe in the immediate postwar period to Downing Street and the White House in 1979 and 1980, respectively. In the aftermath of the Great Depression and the failures of laissez faire capitalism, Keynesian welfare policies and government regulation of markets dominated most Western societies. Economists who remained committed to the laissez faire ideal, or something close to it, saw their work pushed to the academic fringes, where they found little support for their ideas outside of the London School of Economics and the University of Chicago. In 1947 a group of likeminded economists founded the Mont Pèlerin Society, an international organization that brought together academics (including Friedman), intellectuals (including Walter Lippmann, for a brief period), and businessman who opposed “government planning,” defended the “market mechanism,” and sought to develop a “new liberalism.”

Angus Burgin’s *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* offers a history of this organization. As Burgin’s insightful analysis makes clear, the members of this first generation of “neoliberals” were not so uncompromising that they would defend the free market and oppose government intervention at any cost. Instead, what united the original members of Mont Pèlerin was only a concern over a *general* belief in a correlation between free markets and free societies. Beyond that, this group of men had little in common. Most believed that, in the aftermath of the Depression, some degree of government oversight and regulation was tolerable and even necessary. Some members worried about a lack of artistic production in a market-driven society. Moreover, they did not believe the market was inherently “moral.” Many of these men, like Friedrich Hayek, were from Central Europe, and some, like Wilhelm Ropke, had even fled Nazi persecution. To them, according to Burgin, markets provided only “an ethically neutral arbiter ... preferable to any system that tried to determine outcomes on the basis of a preconceived notion of the good” (188).

It was Milton Friedman who would bring the ideas of the Mont Pèlerin society both to their ideological extreme and to global influence. As a young scholar in the early 1950s Friedman, like most other Mont Pèlerin members, was more willing to concede to government regulations in addressing inequality than in later years. By the time he

published *Capitalism and Freedom* in 1962, however, Friedman had abandoned any support of the role of government beyond law and order, property rights, and little else. Unlike Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), which warned against the dangers of central planning and socialism, but nonetheless recognized the importance of government within a free market economy, Burgin argues that "the universality of Friedman's belief in the efficacy of free markets exceeded even that of the nineteenth-century theorists whose legacy Hayek had spent the postwar years working to overcome" (184). Burgin further emphasizes that, for Friedman, "markets elegantly and reliably promoted virtuous behavior ... [they] provided an ideal system for directing compensation to the deserving" (188).

The publication of *Capitalism and Freedom* brought Friedman an international audience beyond the field of economics. His ideas caught the attention of Barry Goldwater, whom Friedman sought out and advised in his 1964 presidential campaign. The stagflation of the 1970s brought even more interest into Friedman's ideas in a decade in which Keynesian remedies seemed incapable of alleviating high unemployment and inflation. The triumph of neoliberalism came with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, whom Friedman had advised since the early 1970s when Reagan was Governor of California. Friedman's ideas had emerged not only the periphery of academia in the immediate post-war years, but even from the fringes of Mont Pèlerin itself, to become the economic foundation of the newly-elected Republican Party.

Burgin's book brings immense detail to illuminating the gradations in the ideas of a group of academics broadly defined as "neoliberals." Burgin's research, particularly the access he to Hayek's papers he obtained from Hayek's estate, provides rich original material to enhance this story. More importantly, by broadening the narrative of these neoliberal thinkers beyond the individual biography, the work offers significant insight into the complex trajectory and transformation of academic ideas into public policy and political advocacy. While Burgin does an excellent job framing the disparities between many of the early neoliberals' flexibility in ideas compared to the unyielding attitudes often espoused by more recent political proponents, what is lacking is a more detailed account of how this change occurred. Burgin offers a brief

account in the book's final chapter that points to the standard explanation of stagflation in the 1970s and the racial politics of the New Right, but that narrative relies mostly on existing scholarship and therefore lacks the original insight evident throughout the first half of the book. In this sense, readers may find themselves somewhat unsatisfied by Burgin's account of how the American public was "persuaded" to buy into neoliberalism.

Taken together, these two works offer important contributions to the social, economic, and political changes in the United States in the 1970s. Both works also raise important questions for scholars regarding the relationship between social and economic policy and how the two influence one another, particularly with regards to neoliberalism and affirmative action. In a seminal article assessing the future of the study of American conservatism, Kim Phillips-Fein notes that "the challenge of scholars of conservatism today" is to "see conservatism with a new perspective—to understand its tenacity through the liberal years, its longstanding relationship to the state and to economic elites, and how its history is intertwined with that of liberalism, as well as the ways its ascendance reflected not only its own political dynamism but also broader changes in American society."^[7] In this regard, both of these texts are highly successful.

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^[1] Jennifer Schuessler, "In History Departments, It's Up With Capitalism." *New York Times*, 6 April 2013.

^[2] Examples of New Right social history include Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Bethany

Moreton, *To Serve God and Walmart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[3] For example, see Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1992); Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963–1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

[4] For example, see Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

[5] Ibid, 4-5.

[6] George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), viii.

[7] Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field.” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec., 2011): 743.

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