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Society, Social Policy and the Ideology of Reaganism

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The complex historical and ideological themes which formed the basis for Reaganism in the 1980s are based on economic individualism, traditionalism and authoritarian populism. By creating an ideological formation which appealed to a wide constituency, right-wing activists sought to reverse the centrist consensus liberalism of the New Deal. These ideas also informed the Reagan administration's social policies and, although not implemented as intended, have had a major impact on the American welfare state.

When Ronald Reagan entered the White House in January, 1981, many believed that the tradition of centrist, consensus liberalism which had governed political affairs in the United States for decades would be dismantled. In his election campaign, Reagan dramatically confronted the liberal tradition, and caught the mood of a disillusioned electorate amenable to new, simple, homespun messages. Once in office, his administration implemented radical right wing policies with ruthless resolve. Although the Reaganite agenda was not implemented as intended, it had a major impact on the nation's legacy of consensus politics.

Many political commentators contend that Ronald Reagan came to power as a result of an orchestrated reaction against establishment centrist politics (Blumenthal, 1986; Kymlicka and Matthews, 1988; Himmelstein, 1990). They view the Reagan victory not as a discreet historical event, but as the culmination of a long and, some would argue, conspiratorial period of struggle in which radical right wing activists sought to reverse the dominance of centrist liberalism and its pervasive influence on economic, cultural, judicial and social affairs. Ironically, the struggle against liberalism originated at the time that Reagan's erstwhile hero, Franklin Roosevelt established the New Deal

and at a time when Reagan, as he himself admits, was a "near hopeless hemophiliac liberal" (Reagan and Hubler, 1981, p. 18).

Although Ronald Reagan's success may be attributed to many factors, an examination of the ideology of Reaganism is required if the the Reagan era is to be properly understood. At the heart of the Reagan phenomenon is a skillful blending of ideological themes that catered to a broad spectrum of the electorate and attracted support from very different constituencies. Economic libertarianism, cultural traditionalism and authoritarian populism were effectively coalesced to appeal simultaneously to urbane Wall Street stockbrokers, fanatical fundamentalist Christians, mainstream middle class suburban Americans and rural Southerners. As an ideology, Reaganism offered a credible alternative to the apparently depleted traditions of centrist liberalism. It also successfully challenged the dominant welfarist ideology of the New Deal.

Reaganism's Historical Origins

As an activist program of social and economic reform, Roosevelt's New Deal lasted for a relatively short time. But, seen in terms of its broader effects, the New Deal exerted a profound influence that lasted for decades. Following earlier and more dramatic changes in Europe, the New Deal legitimized the institutionalization of statism and welfarism in American society. Although the New Deal failed to create a highly centralized and comprehensive European style welfare state, it secured support for the notion that the state is a central social institution responsible not only for defense and law and order but for economic planning and the promotion of growth, the enhancement of welfare and the regulation of many facets of everyday life.

The New Deal also brought about a major political realignment in American politics. Under Roosevelt, the Democrats ceased to be a predominantly Southern party drawing support from the cities and from urban workers, ethnic voters and a large section of the middle class. Re-emerging as a force for progressive liberalism, the Democratic party also succeeded in building a coalition between liberal politicians, the labor movement, intellectuals, professionals and the business sector.

Above all, the New Deal institutionalized a culture of pragmatic, centrist liberalism that many believed heralded the end of ideology. Unlike most of Europe, where ideological differences between the major political parties were unambiguous and readily identified with class and other sectional interests, the New Deal facilitated a convergence in American politics in which the two major parties adopted similar centrist policies and forged a consensus around major economic, social and political issues. This convergence was reflected in the policies of successive Republican and Democratic administrations.

These developments led many analysts to conclude that the end of ideology had been definitively reached. In a much cited work, political scientist Daniel Bell claimed that ideology, had "come to a dead end" (1962, p. 393). In his attempt to formulate a generalized sociological construction of the social world, the celebrated Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) conceived of American society as a well-regulated, homeostatic system characterized by consensus rather than conflict. Most analysts agreed and also took the view that radical movements on both the right and left were aberrations in the smooth functioning new world of mainstream consensus liberalism. For example, Richard Hofstadter (1963) argued that organizations such as the John Birch Society, Christian Crusade and supporters of McCarthyism were little more than disaffected groups on the social fringe struggling to deal with their status anxieties.

Those on the radical right took a different view. For them, consensus politics was not a mainstream phenomenon but the product of an insidious, left-leaning liberal establishment that had successfully penetrated both political parties to exert a powerful hegemonic control over the nation. Determined to challenge its dominance, the radical right schemed, organized and planned in the hope of forming an effective counterestablishment capable of fermenting a counterrevolution to the New Deal and its allegedly perfidious influence (Blumenthal, 1986).

Some analysts place the origins of the radical right's counterrevolution in the mid-1960s, after the failure of Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. But its roots are much older. Indeed, the lineage of right wing struggle against the centrist legacy of the New Deal is a long one. It can be traced back to

Hoover himself, the embittered former president whose wealth and name supported a policy research institute which has vigorously propagated radical right ideas, and served as a model for numerous other right wing think tanks. It can be traced to the eccentric activities of Albert Jay Nock and his prophetic faith in a 'Remnant' that would one day rise up and overthrow the New Deal and its attendant evils. It can be traced back to the publications of works such as *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944, and *The Conservative Mind* in 1953 by then obscure authors Friedrich Hayek and Russell Kirk, and the founding of *National Review* in 1955.

The Reagan victory can also be traced to the failures of the radical right to exercise real political power during the liberal post-New Deal years, including those when Republican presidents were in office. Despite its fanatical vigor, the McCarthy campaign of the 1950s fizzled and while considerable resources were mobilized, the attempt to send a right wing candidate to the White House in 1964 ended in embarrassing defeat. Although Richard Nixon had appropriate credentials, he betrayed the radical right because of his apparent accommodation with communism, his moderate stance on many domestic issues and, of course, the Watergate fiasco. His selection of Gerald Ford as his successor, and Ford's subsequent nomination of Nelson Rockefeller as Vice President dismayed right wing radicals. As Richard Viguerie, one of their most dedicated activists reports, "For many of us, it was the last straw" (1980, p. 28). While Ford represented the comprising, consensus politics that had dominated Washington's political establishment for decades, Rockefeller's Eastern establishment background and his opposition to Goldwater in 1964 personified everything that was wrong with mainstream Republicanism. As Viguerie notes, the radical right did not lack money or enthusiasm, nor did it lack ideas and ideologies; what it lacked was a leader who could appeal to the electorate and convince citizens of the need for radical change. The leader who emerged to fill this vacuum was Ronald Reagan.

Reagan dates his own conversion from New Deal liberalism to his early days in Hollywood when he came to believe that the film industry was riddled with communists whom liberals refused to oppose. By the 1960s, he had not only become a dedicated anticommunist but an opponent of the very policies

Roosevelt had introduced. In 1962, he formally changed party affiliation to join the Republicans and in 1964 he campaigned aggressively for Goldwater. Polonberg (1988) points out that Reagan's speeches at this time were characterized by a virulent antiwelfarism which castigated the welfare state as "the most dangerous enemy known to man," and ridiculed unemployment insurance as a state sponsored "prepaid vacation plan for freeloaders."

During the 1970s, radical right wing forces gathered around Reagan. Disillusioned with traditional republican leaders, they had considerable resources at their command. Far right business tycoons such as William Simon and Charles Wick poured millions of dollars into the campaign. The candidate also had a clearly articulated ideology with specific programs for action. Beginning with William Buckley and the creation of *National Review* in the 1950s, the intellectual base for radical right wing ideas had been carefully articulated. With the help of right wing think tanks, and numerous journals and magazines, these ideas were presented as a plausible program for action. Effective coalitions were built with electorally significant movements such as the fundamentalist Christian right, and with the support of highly organized campaigners such as Viguerie and Weyrich, the stage was set for a Reagan victory in 1980. In addition, salutary lessons had been learned from the campaign for the Republican nomination in 1976.

Jimmy Carter was an ideal opponent. Despite his effective use of populist electoral strategies in the 1976 presidential race, Carter was caught in a web of circumstances that favored the Reaganite strategy. The economic difficulties of the 1970s were presented as the result of liberal mismanagement, heavy taxes and an overgenerous welfare system and not as a consequence of global difficulties stemming from the rapid oil price increases or from deindustrialization and other international economic events. An increase in permissiveness, moral relativism and individual choice which had characterized the 1960s was depicted not as the consequence of inevitable social change in an advanced industrial society but of the failure of liberalism to maintain social order and support traditional values. The foreign policy debacle of Iran was successfully portrayed

as the result of liberal weakness and placatory concessions to the nation's enemies. Exploiting these problems, Ronald Reagan successfully caricatured Carter and his troubles as a manifestation of failed liberalism and he victoriously secured the White House.

The Ideology of Reaganism

If events in the 1970s served the radical right's campaign efforts, the message they presented is equally important in understanding Ronald Reagan's electoral appeal. Juxtaposing their new, easily comprehensible and aggressive ideology against the teachings of mainstream liberalism, the radical right secured widespread voter support. While notions of self-doubt, a recognition of the complexity of issues, and the toleration of diverse views have long been central ingredients in traditional liberal thought, these became electoral liabilities. In the context of serious economic difficulties, increased moral relativism and declining international influence, the ideals of liberalism appeared ineffectual and incapable of dealing with the problems of the time. Reaganism, on the other hand, offered simple, commonsensical and vigorous solutions. Reagan's aggressive posturing on international issues, his dogmatic assertion that tax cuts and welfare reductions would resolve economic problems, and his promise of better times were effectively packaged.

However, behind the media messages lay a serious and deadly effective constellation of ideological beliefs which had been successfully forged into a unitary system through years of intellectual experimentation. These were cleverly synthesized to comprise the new ideology of Reaganism which had considerable appeal. At least three themes can be identified within this complex ideology: these are economic individualism, cultural traditionalism and authoritarian populism.

The Role of Economic Individualism

The New Deal legitimized state intervention in economic, social, cultural and other spheres of life and exemplified a concerted attempt at economic regulation and planning. Using Keynesian techniques, post-New Deal administrations intervened directly to manage the economy. The prosperity of the 1950s

and 1960s suggested that interventionism was not only desirable but effective. A few dissenters, such as Hayek and the minority free-market wing of the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago (where Milton Friedman's ideas were cultivated) were relegated to the fringe of the discipline.

Keynesian doctrine first appeared to be in serious difficulty in the early 1970s when the phenomenon of stagflation became endemic. Recessionary tendencies had previously been amenable to demand stimulus, but now recession and soaring inflation combined to present a new and apparently insoluble problem. Faced with stagnation, escalating energy costs, increasing trade union activism, falling productivity, de-industrialization and capital flight, Keynesianism seemed impotent. Suddenly, the advocacy of radical economic individualism seemed plausible.

Friedman was the first of the radical economic individualists to gain national attention. His *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) was written in lay language and despite claims to positivist objectivity, it offered an attractive ideological formulation which was highly compatible with American traditional culture. Friedman worked closely with Goldwater to develop a radical right alternative economic strategy and by the mid-1970s, his ideas had formed the basis for various economic individualist theses.

The most important of these was Arthur Laffer's supply-side economic theory which contended that large reductions in taxation would stimulate economic activity and, as a result of higher output, generate higher fiscal revenues. Supply-side teachings caught Reagan's imagination and provided formal justification for his instinctive desire to slash taxes. And it was in the name of supply-side economics that massive budgetary cuts and tax reductions were introduced early in the president's first term.

The ideological bases for monetarism, supply-side economics and similar formulations are grounded in classical individualist thought and, as such, offer little that is new. They have, however, been implemented with considerable effect. In the United States, supply-side ideas resulted in the massive de-regulation of broadcasting, communications and the energy sector. They also resulted in substantial budgetary reductions particularly to state welfare programs. And, as Phillips (1990)

reports, they produced a substantive re-distribution of income in favor of the wealthy.

However, the promised results of the aggressive adoption of economic individualism have not been realized. Tax and budgetary reductions have not spurred prosperity but have resulted in a mammoth deficit and in the increased immiserization of the poor. Contrary to the belief that de-regulation would facilitate greater competition, monopolization continues apace. Privatization of state human service programs has not magically solved pressing social problems but merely provided new avenues for entrepreneurship. Also, the radical right's dogmatic adherence to economic individualism has not reduced state power. Instead, the Reagan years have shown that the very considerable resources of the state can be used to promote the sectional interests of the powerful rather than the general welfare of the population.

The Importance of Traditionalism

A second theme in the ideology of Reaganism is cultural traditionalism. Conservatives have always valued tradition and order and this impulse was successfully integrated into the Reaganite campaign. A primary stimulus for the radical right's obsession with order was the counterculture of the 1960s. The rise of campus and other revolutionary groups, an increase in labor activism, the urban riots, the popularization of narcotics, increased sexual freedom and mass opposition to the Vietnam War appalled conservatives and appeared to threaten the fundamental values of American society. While the Johnson administration was hardly subversive of established authority, its liberalism bore the brunt of the traditionalist backlash.

Transitionalist reaction to permissiveness and diversity came from several quarters. As may be expected, it galvanized fundamentalist opinion which eagerly supported Reagan. The promise of order also had considerable appeal to 'middle Americans' in the suburbs and rural communities who viewed campus idiosyncrasies, urban violence and loud rock music alike with increasing alarm. But of equal significance was the reaction of a group of intellectuals, loosely known as the Neo-conservatives,

who provided the theoretical basis for the traditionalist component of Reaganite ideology.

Although Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz are most frequently identified as the movement's leaders, numerous other writers and academicians including Robert Nisbett, Michael Novak, George Gilder, Peter Berger and others have been associated with Neo-conservative thinking and with their leading journals *Commentary* and *Public Interest*.

Central to the Neo-conservative's critique lies an abhorrence of liberalism's acceptance of modernity and permissiveness. Kristol regards the rampant individualism of the modern age as a primary cause of societal ills. By placing individual rights above those of duty and responsibility to the wider community, the values of society are dangerously weakened with the result that nihilism replaces order and undermines organically binding institutions. This has resulted in an increase in crime, violence, and other social problems and in the demise of the traditional family with a concomitant increase in welfare dependency. Instead of counteracting these trends by seeking to impose traditional values, the modern state has licensed permissiveness, and thus undermined vital social institutions.

These ideas have been articulated with particular reference to welfare and family policy in the writings of George Gilder (1973, 1980) and Charles Murray (1984), both of whom claimed that the liberal New Deal and its welfare programs had undermined the traditional family and its responsibility to care for its members. The rise of feminism had further exacerbated the problem, creating fatherless, rootless families unable to utilize their own resources to contribute to the good of the community. Similarly, the increase in permissiveness had encouraged illegitimacy and welfare dependency.

The Neo-conservative's rejection of moral relativism and their emphasis on the revitalization of traditional values had electoral resonance. The Reagan campaign aligned closely with the fundamentalist Christian right and although Carter had previously claimed to be a born again Christian, his support of liberal causes such as abortion caused massive defections of his fundamentalist followers. Concentrating their electoral effort on

those constituencies that were most amenable to traditionalist appeal, the Reaganites scored notable gains.

There were some attempts to translate traditionalist ideas into legislative action during the Reagan years. Although the introduction of the Family Life Support Bill in the administration's early years was a major traditionalist legislative initiative, it failed miserably. If enacted, it would have restricted abortion, prohibited legal aid in cases of divorce, abortion and homosexual rights, required an emphasis on traditional American family values in the classroom and prohibited teaching materials that "denigrates the role of women as it has been traditionally understood" (Jorstad, 1987, p. 18). Nevertheless, it appears that the traditionalist struggle against abortion, pornography and accessible contraception, which is today being waged in the streets by highly committed groups of right-wing and fundamentalist activists, is making some headway.

The Appeal of Authoritarian Populism

American politics has relied extensively on populist ideological strategies and Ronald Reagan's use of these techniques were not, therefore, novel. Indeed, Jimmy Carter had shown in the 1976 campaign that he was a dexterous manipulator of populist sentiment. But Reagan played the populist card with greater effectiveness not only in terms of electoral technique but in terms of ideological content.

Analysts of populism (Wiles, 1969; Canovan, 1981) have contended that populism has greatest appeal in times of social stress. Effective populist political strategies seek to exploit feelings of discontent by juxtaposing the interests of ordinary people against those of the cause of discontent. During the Reagan campaign, the liberal establishment and its big government, were effectively presented as the cause of social ills.

A major focus of the Reaganite populist campaign was the economic difficulties of the time. While most politicians recognized the complexities of the situation and supported efforts to formulate intricate solutions, ordinary people became increasingly perplexed. The presentation of a simple diagnosis of the situation, and of straightforward remedies in terms that were readily comprehensible was highly successful. Instead of

attributing economic woes to complex international and domestic developments, the Reaganites blamed indifference, high taxes, welfare dependency and trade union obstructiveness for the country's economic difficulties. Since this confirmed popular beliefs, many voters instinctively identified with the candidate and his simple, homespun explanations.

The Reagan campaign skillfully injected another element into the populist agenda—strong, authoritarian leadership. Casting Jimmy Carter's entanglement in the Iran crisis as weak and indecisive, Reagan projected a belligerent Rambo-like approach to foreign policy and particularly towards communism. Here was a leader who would not placate the enemy but assert American superiority. The "evil empire" would be resisted with a massive defense build-up and with technologically superior new weaponry that would secure military supremacy. Even though the president's television appearances suggested a faltering approach, an indecisiveness when answering questions, and a preference for jelly beans rather than war, the strong leader image was effectively cultivated and it had huge appeal.

Other elements which formed the basis of Reaganite authoritarian populism include antiwelfarism, traditionalism, racism, anticommunism and patriotism. The Reaganite attack on welfare, moral relativism, the alleged excesses of affirmative action, and the decline in national pride effectively exploited subterranean authoritarian sentiments, and provided comfort to those who felt that their grievances were being ignored by an indifferent political establishment. The appeal to populism also had the effect of facilitating social cohesion. The administration's unrelenting attacks on the Soviet Union strengthened the image of a common enemy and fostered cohesion. By exploiting populist sentiments, Reagan deftly developed Nixon's earlier notion of the silent majority. Ordinary people who opposed welfarism, communism, permissiveness and the excesses of liberalism were not only in the majority, but the authentic upholders of true American values and beliefs. In so doing, Reagan not only increased his electoral support but enhanced emotive feelings of nationhood and fostered an organic identification between the people and their national leader. Since this reduced the feelings of alienation and discontent which characterized the late 1970s,

the claim that the Reagan had restored national pride and self-confidence has some validity.

Social Policy and the Ideology of Reaganism

The themes which comprised the ideology of Reaganism have found expression in the administration's various programs and legislative enactments in social policy. Economic individualist ideas pervaded the substantial budgetary cuts imposed on the human services during the president's first term. Traditionalist ideas were expressed in the way administrative procedures in the human services were tightened to the detriment of needy women with children. The Family Support Act of 1988 gave expression to both economic individualist ideas and to an underlying traditionalist antagonism to single parent families dependent on state support. By curtailing human service programs, the Reagan administration effectively affirmed dearly held beliefs about the importance of work, sobriety and success in American society.

In their campaign, the Reaganites consistently emphasized antiwelfarist themes, effectively evoking the familiar image of the workshy, freeloading welfare recipient who is luxuriously supported by the state at great cost to the taxpayer. Although antiwelfarist sentiments have long had a prominent place in the folk demonology of American popular culture, Reagan effectively linked economic troubles and the perceived decline in moral standards to the Johnson administration's social policy initiatives. Drawing on the arguments of right wing think tanks as articulated by Murray (1984), he effectively communicated the idea that American social policy over previous decades had harmed rather than helped the poor. The alternative, he argued, was a radical disengagement of the state from social welfare. Unlike his conservative predecessors who sought to curtail welfare, Reagan argued for abolition.

Although the Reagan administration did not meet this objective, it certainly tried. In its first two years of office, it imposed substantial budgetary cuts on social expenditures and by 1984, as Bawden and Palmer (1984) reported, the administration had succeeded in cutting deeply into major social programs. Unemployment insurance had been reduced by 17.4%, child nutrition

programs by 28%, food stamp expenditures by 13.8%, and the Community Service Block Grant program by 37.1%. Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a primary target of the administration's antiwelfarism, suffered by a cut of 14.3%. These cuts were accompanied by reductions in benefits levels and by the imposition of stringent eligibility requirements which excluded many needy people from receiving any form of aid. Moffit and Wold (1987) have shown that the cuts in the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act alone terminated as many as 35% of working AFDC recipients.

The attack on the human services was accompanied by substantial tax cuts which were intended not only to implement supply-side doctrine but as David Stockman (1986), the administration's budget director cynically admitted, to starve Congress of the revenues needed to restore the cuts and to introduce new programs. Tax cuts benefited the wealthy and the corporations. Citing just one example of the massive subsidies directed at the commercial and industrial sectors, Harrison and Bluestone (1988) show that changes to the rules governing the depreciation of equipment resulted in taxpayers subsidizing the full costs of business capital outlays. The antiwelfarist developments of the 1980s were consonant with Reaganite ideology which had consistently condemned state involvement in welfare. Instead, self-reliance, the family, the voluntary sector and the for-profit commercial human service sector would replace the state as primary provider. As Carlson and Hopkins (1981), two Reagan White House aids explained, state provision would be permitted only for those who could not work and had absolutely no other means of support.

Two factors impeded the realization of the radical right's antiwelfarist goals. First, Congress resisted the cuts and with the return of a Democratic majority, the Reaganite agenda was thwarted. Second, the cuts and the recession combined to generate a highly visible poverty problem. As Friedmanite monetarist prescriptions were introduced by the Federal Reserve, and as interest rates soared, GNP fell by 4.9% in the fourth quarter of 1981 alone and by another 3.2% during 1982. By the end of 1982, 4.5 million more people were unemployed than in 1979 (Harrison and Bluestone, 1988). Homelessness became

a serious problem and the incidence of infant mortality and hunger increased. Faced with these dramatic consequences, the administration reluctantly began to soften its position. Monetary policy was relaxed and budgetary appropriations for military and other items were increased.

But while the welfare state survived, the Reaganites succeeded in severely undermining its legitimacy and budgetary base. It is perhaps ironic that the administration's artificially induced recession and its massive budget cuts impeded its primary goal of abolishing the welfare state. Had the recession not been so severe, and produced negative reactions, the administration may not have reversed its position. And, had the budget cuts not been so ruthlessly and carelessly implemented, the voluntary sector might well have emerged as a credible alternative to state provision. Instead, as Salamon (1984) noted, budget appropriations for the voluntary sector suffered major cuts and this effectively hindered its ability to replace state services.

The Reagan Legacy: Durable or Transient?

The Reagan administration's coming to office in 1981 heralded a major change in American politics. The radical ideology of Reaganism coupled with an aggressive political style suggested that Reaganite resolve would engender enduring economic, political and social changes. Now, ten years later, it is possible to make some initial assessment about the significance of the Reagan years.

As has been suggested earlier, the Reagan administration did not achieve all its objectives. The welfare state remains more or less intact even though its effectiveness has been impeded. Although somewhat more fragmented than before, welfare pluralism continues to characterize the American approach to social policy and despite the Reagan onslaught, the country remains what Jansson (1988) and others have called as a 'reluctant welfare state'.

On the other hand, the administration clearly introduced significant and durable changes. Perhaps the most important of these for social policy is the budget deficit which will effectively preclude the generation of new revenues for social expenditures in the immediate future. The successful facilitation of populist

antitax sentiment through tax cuts, tax reform and skillful campaigning, have reinforced popular antipathy to new revenues, especially for the human services. Of equal importance is the effects the Reagan years have had on the Democratic party which has failed to mount an effective counterattack. While the Reagan administration did not succeed in bringing about a fundamental political realignment in electoral politics, it weakened the liberal consensus. As Schneider (1988) observed, moderates within both parties who previously formed the core of centrist liberalism, have been swept to the side while those on the right now appear to hold sway. The hardening of public opinion as well the deliberate weakening of the trade unions has exacerbated the problems facing the Democratic party and its traditional allies. While welfarists within the party search for ways of presenting their ideals in ways that are electorally realistic, many have turned away from the party's historic commitment to welfare. In this situation, it not clear who will effectively represent the deprived, needy and powerless in American society.

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