

Radical Americas

Book review:

Radicals in America: The US Left since the Second World War
by Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps

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***Radicals in America: The US Left since the Second World War* by Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 355pp.**

‘As radicalism oscillates between margin and mainstream, its usual position is as outlier. That does not make American society impervious to it’ (p.16). In their compendious survey of modern US radical history, Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps frequently return to this fluctuation between the socio-political periphery and centre. Their various radicals are mocked, berated and persecuted yet often find their ideas gaining currency, and as such moving from margin to mainstream.

The structure of *Radicals in America* is simple enough, cleaving to the chronological narrative which takes the reader from the confusion of the left’s position at the onset of the Second World War all the way through to Zuccotti Park, *Jacobin*, and Trayvon Martin. That alone will ring some alarm bells, as there is a necessary trussing up of many and various left radicalisms into a seemingly coherent progression. However, Brick and Phelps remain clear throughout that the breadth and capaciousness of US radicalism should imply neither internal agreement nor consistency. Thus, some of the chapters deal with periods characterized by cooperation and unity, while others tell a tale of factionalism and recriminations.

The book begins with some of the seismic impacts of the Second World War – on labour, the military, segregation and nationalism – in a chapter entitled ‘War and Peace, 1939–1948’. The second chapter (‘All Over This Land, 1949–1959’) takes in the rapid development of the Cold War and McCarthyism, the growth of the civil rights movement,

incipient gay activism ('Bachelors for Wallace'), bohemianism and the crisis of pro-Soviet communism after Stalin. In a chapter of fewer than forty pages, there is an inevitable sense of being chivvied along; there are eleven years and many ground-breaking processes covered, and while this does not inhibit enjoyment or utility, there is a tangible slowing as we move into 'A New Left, 1960–1964'.

This chapter, and the one that follows ('The Revolution Will Be Live, 1965–1973'), are really the crux of the book, and the point at which 'interchange between margin and mainstream become not only conceivable but frequent' (p.120). Gay liberation and Black Power are enthrallingly intertwined with opposition to the Vietnam War in a way that raises many questions; this volume will have the curious reader scurrying off to find out more in the way that all good syntheses should. The framework aspires to be definitive but the content does not claim to be the last word. Movements, tendencies and groups come and go, but the authors successfully weave a dynamic patchwork, a convincing picture of a left that has changed a good deal over time but has retained some kind of progressive internal logic. As Alan Wald has put it, Brick and Phelps have 'a dozen tabs open at any one time'.¹

While the book is structured chronologically, chapters cover periods varying from four years (on the explosion of radicalisms seen in the early sixties) to twenty-five years (covering the post-Cold War era). No doubt this is primarily due to the uneven nature of radical activity, and where there is a great outpouring of ideas or protests, the authors sensibly pause to give such conjunctures the necessary attention. That said, Brick and Phelps do feel on somewhat surer ground in the pre-1973 era, and by the time we reach recent decades, the narrative is rather brisker and less detailed.

A great deal happened in a short space of time, of course. Brick and Phelps select 1973–4 as a dividing line for three reasons: 'American withdrawal from Vietnam, economic recession, and the Watergate scandal' (p.177). Following these ruptures, movements concerned with a panoply of issues including indigenous rights, women's rights, gay rights, pacifism and environmentalism interacted, campaigned, and achieved some successes – *Roe vs. Wade*, for instance – but struggled to form a coherent and mutually supportive 'movement of movements'.

It was not all doom and gloom, though. 'Anticipation, 1973–1980' suggests change in the air, but 'even at the end of the decade', argue the authors, 'the left was still animated by a great sense of practical possibilities rooted in on-the-ground mobilization' (p.215). The 1980s, though, were a disappointment or, rather, a series of disappointments.

Those interested in the growing influence of the left wings of the US Democratic Party and British Labour Party might pay special attention to Chapter Six ('Over the Rainbow, 1980–1989') and its balanced critique of the coalition behind Reverend Jesse Jackson.

The final chapter ('What Democracy Looks Like, 1990 to the present') is an ambitious gallop through a messy quarter-century. This context is rendered tricky in two ways, as radicalism underwent significant post-Cold War shifts, fragmentations and reformulations, while the backdrop of capitalism also crystallized into a profoundly altered form. Nevertheless, key contemporary flashpoints and movements are woven into the tapestry; Black Lives Matter and Occupy do not seem hastily tacked on, but instead are placed in a proper historical context.

The book has already made quite an impact, drawing both praise and criticism, from widely varying (and sometimes surprising) sources. Brick and Phelps were taken to task by Norman Markowitz for diminishing the impact of the CPUSA during the 1940s and 1950s.² This seems unfair, as the first two chapters of the book concentrate substantially on the party, its internal debates and wider influence. A minor gripe which is by now a hoary commonplace, but it bears repeating: the US is not America. It is a matter of usage, but we would urge radicals of all stripes to adopt it. It is especially relevant in a context which interacts with other parts of the Americas frequently, whether the 'inner orbit' of puertorriqueñx or chicanx activists, or the 'outer orbit' of Central America or Chile. However, this does not diminish the book's many qualities, and it is highly recommended both to newcomers and to old hands in the history of radicalism.

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Notes

- 1 Alan Wald, "Review Essay: Reaching for Revolution," *Against the Current* 179 (2015), <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4527>.
- 2 See Norman Markowitz, "Review of

Brick, Howard; Phelps, Christopher, 'Radicals in America: The US Left since the Second World War', *H-1960s, H-Net Reviews* (February 2016).