

Book Review: Radicals in America, by Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps

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Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War by Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, 2015 Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Also discussed: *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, 1980 Perennial Classics, New York, NY.

As George Orwell reminds us, those who control the past control the future. But as anyone who has been in or around radical organizing recently can tell you, historical consciousness is sorely lacking within left movements today – far too many organizers are unaware of how we got to this point, or that many of the struggles they face have arisen before. Into this unfortunate gap steps the recent *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War*, by Howard Brick, the Louis Evans Professor of History at the University of Michigan, and Christopher Phelps, Associate Professor of American History at the University of Nottingham.

Billed as the “first comprehensive history of radicalism to reach beyond the sixties,” (p. i) *Radicals* admirably chronicles the ups and downs of the American left over the last 75 years. The book is organized chronologically, with each of the seven chapters opening with “a biography of a life – typically, an unsung life – that in some way illustrates key themes of the radicalism of that period” (p. 16). These vignettes are well-chosen, and allow Brick and Phelps to work in some first-hand accounts of the events of that particular period. Unsurprisingly for a book covering such a broad topic, *Radicals* occasionally slips into textbook mode, flying across the surface of people, organizations, and events that could each merit their own book. But thanks to this broad scope, the book is able to offer something to anyone who identifies with or studies the left. As someone interested in left electoral politics, I found the sections on the

strength of various left parties in the 1940s not just informative but empowering; as a lifelong lowan, I paid close attention to the regular mentions of my home state's radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Radicals' overriding virtue lies in shaping a coherent chronology out of the messiness of the postwar left, a chronology which every organizer or theorist of the left should know. But chronology is not exactly history – in addition to the *what* of the past, historians should seek to tell us the *why*. And this is where *Radicals* struggles. Too often, Brick and Phelps' explanation of why certain movements broke into the mainstream where others stayed on the margins stays safely within the received wisdom about radical organizing: that sectarianism is bad (except when it isn't), or that the left has achieved major victories in some ways but not in others.

This weakness certainly has something to do the breadth of the subject matter; covering this amount of material in the single volume simply doesn't leave much space for analysis. But I also think it has to do with Brick and Phelps' lack of an overarching theory of history. The closest they get to a central thesis comes in their introduction, where they write: "The waxing and waning of radical fortunes across this entire [postwar] period are best understood by apprehending *margin* and *mainstream* as the constitutive duality of the American radical experience" (p. 7). But Brick and Phelps simply use these terms as synonyms for "radical" and "not radical," respectively, without digging any deeper into how they relate to each other.

An instructive parallel here is to Howard Zinn's classic *A People's History of the United States*. Zinn makes his scholarly project explicit in the very first chapter of his book, where he argues that history as it is traditionally taught ignores major conflicts of interest between social classes, and that his goal is to tell history from the perspective of the oppressed classes. Both *A People's History of the United States* and *Radicals in America* tell the story of political movements, but where Zinn's "people's history" framing is explanatory, Brick and Phelps' idea of "marginality" is tautological; where *A People's History* is explicitly political, *Radicals* attempts a sort of objectivity.

This theoretical weakness is all the more frustrating because margin and mainstream are so close to two much richer concepts, from the Gramscian tradition: that of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic social formations. Starting from those terms could have added the narrative structure missing from the book as well as placing it within a larger, highly developed theoretical framework. But even without a solid theoretical grounding, or an overarching conclusion about the lessons of the past, Brick and Phelps' book is still a worthy entry into the canon of the left. At this historical moment, with green shoots as varied as the Black Lives Matter movement, Bernie Sanders' presidential candidacy, and the Fight for 15 sprouting up through the neoliberal consensus, understanding the American left's evolution over the last few decades is now more important than ever.