

A War for the Soul of America

A History of the Culture Wars

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Introduction

When Patrick Buchanan declared “a war for the soul of America” during his raucous primetime speech before the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, he reiterated a theme that had animated his underdog campaign against President George H. W. Bush in that year’s primaries. This theme was the “culture wars,” a struggle, in Buchanan’s words, “as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” With such urgent rhetoric, the right-wing former adviser to presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan aimed to elevate the stakes of that year’s presidential election. The nation was confronted with more than a choice between Bush and the Democratic challenger Bill Clinton: it was a decision “about who we are,” “about what we believe,” about whether “the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which this nation was built” would survive.¹

Buchanan’s notorious speech punctuated a series of angry quarrels that dominated national headlines during the 1980s and 1990s. Whether over abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, evolution, family values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, media, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, sex education, the Western canon—the list of such divisive issues goes on and on—the United States was beset by “culture wars.” Buchanan’s “war for the soul of America” was on.²

The issues at stake in the culture wars were real and compelling. Such a seemingly straightforward notion defies a well-worn argument, forwarded by Thomas Frank in his 2005 jeremiad *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, that the culture wars were superficial and helped engender an irrational political landscape. In pithy fashion, Frank re-

lates the hullabaloo over the artist Andres Serrano's blasphemous *Piss Christ*, a photo of a crucifix submerged in a jar of the artist's urine, to his thesis that "culture wars get the goods." "Because some artist decides to shock the hicks by dunking Jesus in urine," Frank writes, "the entire planet must remake itself along the lines preferred by the Republican Party, U.S.A." Frank's argument goes as follows: religious conservatives often voted against their own economic interests due to their illogical obsession with the culture wars, to which Republican politicians cynically lent rhetorical support as they attended to more important matters, such as rewriting the tax codes in favor of the rich. Frank's fellow Kansans defy his populist expectations that they direct their anger at the wealthy—at those responsible for making their economic lives so precarious. In this schema, debates about the idea of America are sideshows.³

But the history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America. Ever since the nation's founding, Americans have wrestled with Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's famous 1782 riddle: "What then is the American, this new man?" Disputes over this knotty question have marked out the battleground of American cultural conflict. And such disputes intensify during tumultuous times of rapid change. The unique period in American history known as "the sixties" and the turbulent decades that followed were just such times.⁴

The sixties gave birth to a new America, a nation more open to new peoples, new ideas, new norms, and new, if conflicting, articulations of America itself. This fact, more than anything else, helps explain why in the wake of the sixties the national culture grew more divided than it had been in any period since the Civil War. Americans split over how to think about this new America. The gulf that separated those who embraced the new America from those who viewed it ominously—those who looked to nurture it versus those who sought to roll it back—drew the boundaries of the culture wars. Sociologist James Davison Hunter put it like this in his important 1991 book *Culture Wars*: "Our most fundamental ideas about who we are as Americans are now at odds."⁵

The history of the culture wars, often misremembered as merely one angry shouting match after another, offers insight into the genuine transformation to American political culture that happened during the sixties.

This is not to say that these transformations emerged from the sixties whole cloth. The sixties counterculture—the ethics of “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll”—flowered from the earlier cultural sensibilities of Beats like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who brought bohemia to the masses with their unconventional poems and books. New Left organizations such as Students for a Democratic Society were sustained by the earlier political sensibilities of leftist intellectuals like C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman, whose radical visions for America transcended Cold War conformism.⁶

Likewise, those sixties conservatives who supported violent police crackdowns on student protestors at the University of California at Berkeley, which Governor Ronald Reagan called a “haven for sex deviants,” emerged from the earlier cultural sensibilities of those angered by Elvis Presley’s pelvic gyrations on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. New Right organizations like Young Americans for Freedom were nourished by the earlier political sensibilities of intellectuals like William Buckley Jr., whose withering critique of “secularist and collectivist” professors gave life to a powerful conservative imagination that had supposedly been rendered obsolete.⁷

Similarly, the demise of intellectual authority and traditions, another upheaval in American life that helped spark the culture wars, was not necessarily new to the sixties. This so-called postmodern condition, or the realization that “all that is solid melts into air”—liberating to some, frightening to others—had long ago shaken the foundations of American thought. The French philosopher Michel Foucault, the most widely read theorist in the American humanities since the sixties, was thought to have revolutionized American intellectual life with relativistic statements of the sort that “knowledge is not made for understanding, it is made for cutting.” In fact, Lynne Cheney, who chaired the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1986 to 1993, argued that Foucault’s “ideas were nothing less than an assault on Western civilization.”⁸ But by the time Cheney had written those words, it had been nearly a century since the American philosopher William James made the antifoundationalist claim that “‘the truth’ is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.” Germane to this point, in the 1940s university students across the country, particularly at elite schools like Harvard University, were assigned to read the American anthropologist Margaret Mead, who, according to the historian David

Hollinger, “explicitly and relentlessly questioned the certainties of the home culture by juxtaposing them with often romanticized images of distant communities of humans.” That many Americans gained familiarity with Mead’s cultural relativism—which promoted the idea that much of what was called “natural” was, rather, “cultural”—was an indication that perhaps part of American political culture had fractured well before the sixties.⁹

But the sixties universalized fracture. Many Americans prior to the sixties, particularly middle-class white Americans, were largely sheltered from the “acids of modernity,” those modern ways of thinking that subjected seemingly timeless truths, including truths about America, to a lens of suspicion. Put another way, prior to the sixties many Americans did not yet recognize the hazards of a world freed from tradition. They did not yet realize that their sacred cows were being butchered. Many Americans felt their world coming apart only once they experienced such chaos as a political force, as a movement of peoples previously excluded from the American mainstream. They grew wary of “an assault on Western civilization” only after the barbarians had crashed the gates. The radical political mobilizations of the sixties—civil rights, Black and Chicano Power, feminism, gay liberation, the antiwar movement, the legal push for secularization—destabilized the America that millions knew. It was only after the sixties that many, particularly conservatives, recognize the threat to their once great nation.¹⁰

After the sixties—and during the culture wars—whether one thought the nation was in moral decline was often a correlative of whether one was liberal or conservative. Joseph Epstein called the sixties “something of a political Rorschach test. Tell me what you think of that period,” he wrote, “and I shall tell you what your politics are.” Those who argued that the sixties had shepherded in ethical anarchy, and that such confusion threatened the very fabric of the nation, tended to be conservative. For instance, conservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote: “The beasts of modernism have mutated into the beasts of postmodernism, relativism into nihilism, amorality into immorality, irrationality into insanity, sexual deviancy into polymorphous perversity.” Conservative jurist Robert Bork echoed these sentiments: “The rough beast of decadence, a long time in gestation, having reached its maturity in the last three decades, now sends us slouching towards our new home, not Bethlehem but Gomorrah.”

Himmelfarb and Bork's right-wing declension narratives advanced a theory of historical change that, no matter how hyperbolic in tone, was more or less accurate. An older America had been lost.¹¹

In the postwar years—the nearly two decades between the end of World War II and the assassination of John F. Kennedy—a cluster of powerful conservative norms set the parameters of American culture. These cultural standards are best described by the phrase “normative America,” an analytical category I use to refer to an inchoate group of assumptions and aspirations shared by millions of Americans during the postwar years. Normative Americans prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own. Normative Americans lived according to stringent sexual expectations: sex, whether for procreation or recreation, was contained within the parameters of heterosexual marriage. Normative Americans behaved in ways consistent with strict gender roles: within the confines of marriage, men worked outside the home and women cared for children inside it. Normative Americans believed their nation was the best in human history: those aspects of American history that shined an unfavorable light on the nation, such as slavery, were ignored or explained away as aberrations. Normative Americans often assumed that the nation's Christian heritage illuminated its unique character: the United States of America really was a “city on a hill.”¹²

The normative America of the postwar years—the normative America of the 1950s—was more omnipresent, and more coercive, than it had been before or has been since. During the 1950s, an unprecedented number of Americans got in line—or aspired to get in line—particularly white, heterosexual, Christian Americans. Even those Americans barred from normative America by virtue of their race, sexuality, or religion often felt compelled to demonstrate compliance. In part, such an extraordinary degree of conformity had to do with Cold War imperatives: a global struggle against an alien system required cultural and ideological stability. But even more, the cohesiveness of postwar normative America was a byproduct of the internal threats to it—threats made manifest during the sixties. It was as if dark clouds of dissent were visible on the not-too-distant horizon. It was as if Americans embraced cultural conformity in order to suspend disbelief about what lurked beneath such a facade.¹³

The new America given life by the sixties—a more pluralistic, more

secular, more feminist America — was built on the ruins of normative America.

This basic historical fact explains the flood of laments about a once great America that emerged by the 1970s. President Nixon expressed such an idea in his second inaugural address of January 20, 1973: “Above all else, the time has come for us to renew our faith in ourselves and in America. In recent years, that faith has been challenged. Our children have been taught to be ashamed of their country, ashamed of their parents, ashamed of America’s record at home and its role in the world. At every turn we have been beset by those who find everything wrong with America and little that is right.” For Nixon, American renewal meant forgetting the sixties, when too many Americans quit loving their country unconditionally.¹⁴

Newt Gingrich, Republican Speaker of the House from 1994 until 1998, wrote an entire book, appropriately titled *To Renew America*, on a similar proposition. “From the arrival of English-speaking colonists in 1607 until 1965,” Gingrich wrote, “from the Jamestown colony and the Pilgrims, through de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, up to Norman Rockwell’s paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, there was one continuous civilization built around commonly accepted legal and cultural principles.” For conservatives like Nixon and Gingrich, the America they loved was in distress. Returning to the values that animated the nation in the 1950s was the only way to save it.¹⁵

Those on the left, by contrast, tended to view American life through the eyes of the sixties — through the eyes of the women, racial minorities, gays and lesbians, secularists, and other Americans whose existence symbolized a challenge to normative America. For them, American culture was always fractured. Conservatives viewed American culture as something that, once whole, had been lost; they felt challenges to normative America to be the shattering of worlds. Whereas the Left considered post-sixties American culture a closer approximation of its ideal form, the Right considered it an abomination. None of which is to say that the American Left was entirely victorious — far from it! In the realms of economic policy and electoral power, conservatives did very well — a historical development that has been amply documented. But in the sphere of culture, the Left had its share of victories. The culture wars were fought on this terrain where the Left was successful.¹⁶

The culture wars were battles over what constituted art, and over

whether the federal government should subsidize art that insulted the most cherished beliefs of millions of Americans. The culture wars were debates over transgressive films and television shows, and over whether insensitive cultural programming should be censored. They were brawls over the public schools, and over whether American children should learn divisive subjects like evolutionary biology. They involved struggles over the university curriculum, and over whether American college students should read a traditional Western canon or texts that represented a more diverse range of perspectives. The culture wars were fights over how the nation's history was narrated in museums, and over whether the purpose of American history was to make Americans proud of the nation's glorious past or to encourage citizens to reflect on its moral failings. In sum, where the Left enjoyed success—in the nation's cultural institutions—conservatives fought back with a ferocity that matched their belief, as Patrick Buchanan put it, that “culture is the Ho Chi Minh Trail to power.”¹⁷

This dramatic struggle, which pitted liberal, progressive, and secular Americans against their conservative, traditional, and religious counterparts, captured the attention of the nation during the 1980s and 1990s. For a period of about two decades, the culture wars, like a vortex, swallowed up much of American political and intellectual life. The culture wars were the defining metaphor for the late-twentieth-century United States. This book tries to make sense of the war.

1

The Sixties as Liberation

In the grand arc of American history, the sixties were unusual. Erratic behavior became common across the political spectrum. In response to a violent police crackdown on antiwar protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, a splinter faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed the infamous Weathermen, a small underground cell of aspirant revolutionaries named after Bob Dylan's line "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." The Weathermen—ultimately responsible for exploding several small bombs, including one at the Pentagon—had given up not only on American democracy but also on the utopian principles of "participatory democracy" upon which SDS was founded, a vision of a citizenry empowered from the grassroots up.¹

At the other end of the power continuum, Richard Nixon's White House, equally disdainful of democracy, countered high-profile leaks of classified information by setting up a clandestine special investigation unit, the notorious "plumbers" who, among other illegal activities, broke into and wiretapped the Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. Although many Americans recoiled at the exploits of both the Weathermen and the Nixon administration, and although few had any clue which way the wind was blowing, they could not help but notice that, as the rock band Buffalo Springfield heralded in 1967, "there's something happening here."²

That "something" was the revolution otherwise remembered as "the sixties."

Liberating to some, frightening to others, the sixties brought the disruptive forces of modernity to the surface of American culture with

a vengeance. A set of youth-driven movements shattered the fragile consensus that had settled over American political culture during the 1950s. Long-downplayed divisions in American society—between white and black and between men and women, to name but two of the most obvious—were made subjects of national debate. Consensus gave way to conflict.

On one side were those who defied normative conceptions of Americanism. As Malcolm X declared in 1964: “I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.” On the other side were those who opposed such challenges. Ronald Reagan gave voice to this America in 1966 when he described the conduct of student radicals as “contrary to our standards of human behavior.” In short, the sixties ushered in an intense new form of polarization that hinged on the very question of America and its meaning. What was America? Was it fundamentally racist and sexist and thus in need of a revolution? Or was it inherently decent and thus worth protecting? Such stark questions informed an increasingly contentious political landscape. There seemed to be no middle ground.³

Because “sixties radicals” commonly play the role of villains in right-wing elegies to a once great nation, historians often assume conservatives overstate the role that leftists played in recasting American culture during the sixties. Indeed, the other side of the sixties—the side represented by Reagan and a powerful conservative movement that was just coming into its own—often serves as evidence that the sixties were not so revolutionary after all. But conservative hyperbole includes more than a few grains of truth. The sixties were a watershed decade due in large part to the role played by the New Left, a loose configuration of movements that included the antiwar, Black Power, feminist, and gay liberation movements, among others. In the ways in which its desires were incorporated into mainstream America, and in the conservative reaction against the threats to a seemingly traditional America that it represented, the New Left was immeasurably influential. Even though its utopian political dreams never approached fruition, the New Left reshaped some of the most important institutions of liberal America, such as Hollywood, the universities, and even, to some extent, the Democratic Party.⁴

The reappearance of the Left during the sixties is a curious episode in American history. Prior to then, the success of American radicalism tended to inversely reflect the economic health of the nation, or

more precisely, the material prospects of activists. Prairie radicals organized under the banner of Populism in the late nineteenth century to challenge the corporate monopolies that gravely threatened their livelihood. Hundreds of thousands of workers joined the mass labor unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in response to the Great Depression. Even the Communist Party, always suspect in American political life, enjoyed a surge in its American ranks during the 1930s, thanks to the relatively common view that the Great Depression had sounded the death knell of capitalism.⁵

But the New Left that came of age in the sixties was different. “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” This, the first sentence of the Port Huron Statement, a 1962 manifesto authored by twenty-two-year-old Tom Hayden that announced the birth of SDS, illuminates the distinctiveness of sixties radicalism.⁶

The New Left was younger and more affluent than any American left before or since. This was particularly true of the hundreds of thousands of young white Americans who, inspired by the civil rights movement and radicalized by the Vietnam War, committed themselves to leftist activism of one sort or another. The nucleus of the New Left, particularly the white New Left, was found on the nation’s college campuses. This was no surprise given that the university system, or what University of California President Clark Kerr poignantly termed “the multiversity” in 1963, was growing in size and significance as millions of baby boomers came of age. In 1960, 3,789,000 students enrolled in American colleges; by 1970, that figure had more than doubled to 7,852,000. Students were a new demographic force to be reckoned with. When graduate student Mario Savio stood on a police car on December 2, 1964, and loudly proclaimed his own existence and that of his fellow Berkeley protestors—“We’re human beings!”—he did more than give voice to the Free Speech Movement that bedeviled Kerr’s flagship campus and angered Reagan’s conservative constituents.⁷

Savio’s protest also sought to embody the alienation of an entire generation. Despite having grown up in the richest nation in the world—at a time when the gross domestic product grew on average more than 4 percent annually, and when unemployment levels were unprecedentedly low—millions of young Americans expressed dissatisfaction with the promise of American life. That Hayden and Savio,

products of capitalism's "golden age" — not to mention the offspring of conservative Catholic parents — would become leaders of a large radical movement speaks to the New Left as a novelty and to the sixties as a sui generis decade.⁸

The young white radicals who joined the New Left, affluent or not, grew up in solidarity with the civil rights movement that ended the brutal Jim Crow caste system in the states of the former Confederacy. Many of the young northerners who headed south in 1964 to participate in Freedom Summer, inspired by what the Port Huron Statement singled out as "the most heartening and exemplary struggle," returned home to organize against racism in their own cities. This fact helps explain the idealism of white radicals. But many young Americans, even affluent white college students, committed themselves to the New Left for idealistic *and* self-interested reasons: in addition to ending racism, they wanted to stop a war that might mean their own death or dismemberment. The sixties antiwar movement, the largest in American history, reverberated from Lyndon Johnson's 1965 escalation of a war in Southeast Asia that resulted in the death of fifty-seven thousand Americans, most of whom had been conscripted, and an estimated three million Vietnamese. As unparalleled numbers of young Americans hit the streets to register their dissent from Johnson's war, SDS grew into a vehicle for a nationwide movement, with chapters springing to life on college campuses across the country.⁹

The transformative effects of this movement were to be found in shifting cultural sensibilities. Rock music, the idiom of sixties-style liberation, offered a cacophony of lyrical testimonials to the changes set off during the decade. In his "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)," a 1967 paean to a rising youth rebellion, Scott McKenzie sang: "There's a whole generation, with a new explanation." A few years later, Marvin Gaye crooned "What's Going On," not as a question but as a statement of fact that, indeed, something was going on. To put it less lyrically: the disruptions of the sixties did not present themselves in a vacuum. Whereas New Leftists might have failed in their efforts to revolutionize the American political system, they succeeded in reorienting American culture. The New Left blew a deep crater into the surface of traditional American culture. Normative America, though still large, still powerful, was nonetheless disfigured beyond repair. Despite the fact that its political goals never really got off the ground, the New Left, in the words of historian Michael

Kazin, “nudged Americans to change some deep-seated ideas about themselves and their society.” In other words, even if they failed to end racism and war, they made the nation less hospitable to racists and warmongers.¹⁰

New Leftists had no shortage of intellectuals to help them explain their estrangement from America. Two of the most influential such thinkers, C. Wright Mills and Paul Goodman, offered young radicals a vision of an America that transcended the rigid conformity of the postwar consensus. New Leftists liked Mills because he projected the image of a renegade: the Texas-born sociologist rode a motorcycle and donned a leather jacket. More to the point, his ideas enunciated the type of antiauthoritarianism that excited New Leftists such as Hayden, who wrote his master’s thesis on Mills and modeled the Port Huron Statement on Mills’s thought. In his popular 1951 book *White Collar*, Mills depicted America as a dystopian, bureaucratic “iron cage.” In his equally influential *The Power Elite*, published in 1956, Mills similarly applied Max Weber’s lens to the institutional structures of the American rich, “those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences.” This intensely hierarchical theory of American power challenged the consensus view, held by most political theorists, that the political system was composed of counterbalancing forces and was thus inherently democratic. The college students who voraciously consumed Mills contended that America was quietly approaching totalitarianism. For them, reading Mills provoked individualistic urges to rebel against the repressiveness of cultural conformity.¹¹

Paul Goodman’s popularity with the New Left owed to his uniqueness among the renowned New York intellectuals, a singularity highlighted by his anarchist intuitions and his open bisexuality. Like the other New York intellectuals, Goodman was a secular Jewish leftist, he attended the City College of New York, he wrote for all the same little magazines, and he flocked to the same parties, where booze and ideas flowed in equally copious amounts. Yet unlike the others, Goodman never joined the Communist Party or any of its Trotskyist offshoots. His anarchism precluded his joining political groups committed to discipline and doctrine. Instead, Goodman believed social change required that individuals simply live differently. Such an approach resonated with New Leftists, who sought alternative ways of living that bypassed corrupted institutions. “Goodman’s fusion of the utopian and

the practical,” writes Dick Flacks, an original SDS member, “provided substance for the impulses of resistance and the visions of a decentralization and community that defined the youth counterculture and the early New Left.”¹²

Goodman’s anarchist skepticism informed his eclectic intellectual interests, including Gestalt psychology, a theory he helped innovate about how people needed to reject the social structures that impeded self-actualization in order to overcome alienation. Antiauthoritarianism also shaped Goodman’s educational thought, where he contended that socialization was the problem, not the solution. He despised both the practice of adjusting children to society and the social regime to which children were being adjusted. The book that unexpectedly made Goodman famous, *Growing Up Absurd: The Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*, published in 1960 and eagerly read by youthful multitudes over the following decade, carried forward the analysis of the bureaucratic straitjacket that had been the fodder of Mills and many other critics during the 1950s. Unlike most of those commentators, however, Goodman focused his anger on how the “iron cage” made life most miserable for young Americans. In this, *Growing Up Absurd* dealt with two of the most analyzed issues of the time, the “disgrace of the Organized System” and juvenile delinquency, arguing that the former caused the latter. It is easy to understand why reading Goodman came to be a cathartic experience for so many young people, even young women who overlooked Goodman’s glaring misogyny while embracing his antiauthoritarianism.¹³

The ways in which Goodman blurred the boundaries between political and cultural radicalism portended the affinity between the New Left and what became known as “the counterculture.” The antinomian shibboleth ubiquitous at New Left rallies—“It is forbidden to forbid!”—illustrated how countercultural expressions flowed from counterestablishment protests. In 1968, New Leftist Theodore Roszak explained how this worked: “The counter culture is the embryonic cultural base of New Left politics, the effort to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new aesthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeois home, and the Protestant work ethic.” Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin founded the Youth International Party—the Yippies—in order to make explicit the alliance between the politically serious New Left and the libertine counterculture. In

1968 they playfully advanced a pig for president, “Pigasus the Immortal,” and advocated group joint-rolling and nude “grope-ins” for peace. Of course, this coalition never materialized to the degree that the Yippies had hoped. Pete Townsend, the lead singer of The Who, symbolically severed such an alliance at the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival. When Hoffman, high on LSD, grabbed the microphone to make a speech about a political prisoner, Townsend swatted him away with his guitar, screaming at him to “get the fuck off my fucking stage!”¹⁴

Allied with the New Left or not, the counterculture represented a real threat to traditional America. By its rejection of authority, its transgression of rules and standards, and its antipathy to anything mainstream, the counterculture pushed the envelope of American norms. True, many of those dubbed “hippies”—typically middle-class whites who repudiated normal America, grew their hair long, smoked marijuana, dropped acid, listened to psychedelic music, and enjoyed frequent recreational sex—merely acted out a mostly harmless generational drama before returning to the fold of capitalist America. But there was no going back to “square” America. In this the counterculture was living out the utopian dreams of the Beats, those unconventional poets like Allen Ginsberg who kept the flames of romanticism burning in bohemian quarters like Greenwich Village until such alienation went national in the sixties.¹⁵

In addition to rejecting traditional pieties, the counterculture revolted against rationalistic explanations of human experience. Columbia University psychologist and countercultural theorist Abraham Maslow grounded his notion of self-actualization in a “hierarchy of needs” that deemphasized intellect as against emotion. Maslow’s 1964 book *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, lionized by the countercultural movement, sought to explode the arbitrary demarcations between mind and spirit, the natural and the transcendental. Maslow argued that humans are biologically programmed to have “peak experiences,” or hallucinatory emotional releases, and that such events occur most often in the course of religious worship. Rationalistic individuals who relegated peak experiences to the realm of the psychotic denied themselves the full range of human consciousness. Maslow’s theory had serious implications for those who wanted to achieve self-actualization but were disenchanting with the monotheistic religious traditions of their parents. In what should be understood as the religious side of the counterculture, the sixties saw the advent of New

Age syncretic religions. A growing number of Americans selectively mixed Eastern religious traditions drawn from Buddhism and Confucianism with a variety of Native American, pagan, and mystical practices. These were disturbing developments to millions of Americans who conflated America and Christianity.¹⁶

For those who desired peak experience minus the religious baggage, even of the New Age variety, mind-altering chemicals were the preferred alternative. Maslow indicated that peak experiences could be manufactured by ingesting LSD. More notoriously, psychologist Timothy Leary, who lost his job at Harvard University in 1963 for running controlled experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, became the nation's premier evangelist for the salubrious effects of LSD. Leary even coined the countercultural motto "Turn on, tune in, drop out," conveying his desire to become more "sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them," drugs being one such particularly effective trigger. Rock music, the perfect counterpart to drug culture, was another means to accomplish a peak experience because it evoked movement, feeling, and experience rather than thought or form. Some of the most popular rock stars of the sixties—Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix—doubled as some of the most expressive, antirationalist, and, coincidentally or not, self-destructive. "If 6 turned out to be 9, I don't mind," Hendrix sang, "'cuz I got my own world to look through, and I ain't gonna copy you." Musicians like Hendrix put to lyrics Charles Reich's philosophical celebration of the counterculture, which he sketched out in his 1970 bestseller *The Greening of America*. Reich theorized that human consciousness had evolved to fit historical circumstances and that the countercultural youth represented the highest state, "Consciousness III." With "less guilt, less anxiety, less self-hatred," Consciousness III individuals proudly proclaimed, "I'm glad I'm me."¹⁷

Although most American youth abstained from dropping acid, cultural change proved difficult to contain. This was made evident by the incorporation of countercultural expressions into powerful mainstream institutions. On television, the most powerful cultural medium in postwar America, the "hip" and the "mod" became fodder for competition between network executives seeking to make inroads into the enormous baby-boomer market. In 1966 NBC began broadcast-

ing *The Monkees*, the first show to make explicit countercultural appeals. Based loosely on *A Hard Day's Night*, a film about The Beatles, *The Monkees* portrayed the wacky exploits of four young musicians composing a rock band tailored for the program. The show routinely scoffed at the symbols of the establishment, such as in one telling episode that featured the boys toying with a hapless authoritarian ex-marine general, a slick caricature of "the man." Many of NBC's rural affiliates refused to air *The Monkees*, but the show achieved the network's objective by attracting a huge youth audience in the nation's growing metropolises.¹⁸

CBS also sought to lure young viewers by adding *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* to its primetime lineup in 1967. Network executives believed that Tom and Dick Smothers, hosts of the whimsical comedy-variety show, were just edgy enough to attract countercultural attention but not too subversive for those viewers with more traditional tastes. This formula worked well at first. The coveted baby boomers watched the show religiously, and so did plenty of others. But after the first season, the Smotherses attracted the kind of attention the network wished to avoid as they increasingly used the show as a platform for radical political positions. The first whiff of controversy arrived with the second season premier, when the Smothers invited radical folk singer Pete Seeger onto the show to sing his antiwar song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Beyond the song, Seeger's very presence was a bone of contention, since he had been on the Hollywood blacklist since the early 1950s red scare. CBS executives cut the song from the episode. Outraged fans convinced the network to soften its stance, and Seeger was invited back to perform "Waist Deep" for a later episode. Explaining this decision, a CBS executive reflected: "It is almost impossible to present contemporary popular songs which do not contain some comment directly or indirectly on issues of public importance: war, peace, civil rights, patriotism, conformity, and the like."¹⁹

Such benevolence quickly dissipated during the show's shortened third season. CBS removed *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* from the airwaves in April 1969, due, ultimately, to its radical politics. In retrospect, it should have been obvious that the show was doomed after the first episode of that season, which aired on September 29, 1968, one month after the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The

network censored musical guest Harry Belafonte's "Don't Stop the Carnival," about a police riot, which he performed against a backdrop of film footage of the Chicago mayhem.²⁰

The rise and fall of *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* revealed that in their efforts to captivate the coveted youth demographic, television networks would take risks with countercultural programming. But they drew the line at broadcasting politically radical messages. From then on, television mostly rendered hippies in ways that domesticated them. For example, the NBC western *Bonanza*, a favorite of traditional Americans, ran an episode in 1970 that sympathetically depicted hippielike characters. Although Ben Cartwright, the show's patriarch, didactically warned against dropping out, he and his morally upright sons tolerated the strange ways adopted by the countercultural "Weary Willies" who had set up a commune on their land. Similarly, Aaron Spelling's *Mod Squad*, first aired in 1968, portrayed three modish misfits who, in order to redeem themselves with a society ready to cast them out, helped the police solve crimes in the countercultural underworld. Such were means of making countercultural styles more acceptable to more people. Although countercultural expressions never entirely replaced traditional American forms, the two came to rest uncomfortably alongside one another, helping to set the parameters of an increasingly divisive cultural politics.²¹

Historian David Farber argues that hippies were the "shock troops" of the culture wars because the sons and daughters of respectable America were expected to toe the line. Their intransigence proved traumatic to many Americans, such as those Californians who voted Ronald Reagan into the governor's mansion in 1966 in part due to his rhetorical attack on Berkeley countercultural protestors. "I'd like to harness their youthful energy," Reagan quipped, "with a strap." But such compelling evidence notwithstanding, the identity-based movements of the New Left—Black and Chicano Power, women's and gay liberation—were ultimately more threatening to the guardians of traditional America than was the counterculture.²²

For New Leftists struggling for full recognition of their identities, contravening normative America, more than a game of Oedipal rebellion played out by white college students, was serious business. For Black Power spokespersons Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, normal America equated to the "white power structure" that had bottled up black freedom for centuries. For radical feminist Robin

Morgan, breaking rules meant fighting patriarchy in the name of a future “genderless society.” And for gay liberationist Martha Shelley, subverting tradition entailed informing “the man” that homosexuals “will never go straight until you go gay.” It is because of the identity-based movements of the New Left that the sixties were an unusually liberating era for a great number of Americans. It was this element of the sixties, even more than the antiwar and countercultural movements, that shook up normative America.²³

The identity-based movements of the sixties offered the promise of cultural liberation to those on the outside of traditional America looking in. Black Power, for instance, was a cultural response to a politically perplexing racial landscape. As President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed in a famous speech at Howard University on June 4, 1965, “equality as a right and a theory” was not the same thing as “equality as a fact and as a result.” This chasm was made horrifyingly apparent by the numerous riots that plagued American cities in the sixties, beginning with one that exploded in the predominantly black Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in August 1965, resulting in thirty-four deaths, thousands of injuries, and untold millions in property damage. That the Watts riot erupted only a few days after the Voting Rights Act outlawed discriminatory voting practices highlighted the vast discrepancy between equality as a right and equality as a fact. The Black Power movement took up the cause of trying to bridge this gap.²⁴

Black Power activists believed the best path to equality was to forge their own. As poet LeRoi Jones put it: “The struggle is for independence.” For many African Americans, independence meant piecing together an entirely new cultural identity, one ostensibly tied to the African continent from which their ancestors were captured and taken into slavery. In Los Angeles, Ronald McKinley Everett changed his name to Maulana Ron Karenga and created the cultural nationalist US Organization in 1965. Members of US learned to speak Swahili, dressed in African robes, and invented the Kwanzaa celebration as a substitute for Christmas and Hanukkah. Black nationalists contrasted halcyon days of African empires past with the wretched state of contemporary black America and logically concluded that a crime of epic proportions had been committed against African Americans in the interim. Glorifying African history and culture, they believed, would facilitate in young African Americans a positive image of themselves. “We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to

liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy,” asserted Malcolm X, the personification of Black Power. “We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people.”²⁵

Although the cultural nationalism of US would have long-lasting influence, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which represented a more militant, more political side of Black Power, inspired a wider audience during the sixties. The Black Panthers, founded in 1966 by Oakland radicals Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, brought “Marxist-Leninist” rhetoric into the Black Power movement. Eldridge Cleaver, author of the electrifying 1968 book *Soul on Ice*, which he wrote while an inmate at Folsom State Prison, articulated the Black Panther ideology in his capacity as the party’s minister of information. Arguing that economic exploitation was the primary cause of black second-class citizenship, Cleaver contended that the Black Panthers were to be the vanguard in the movement to liberate the “black urban lumpenproletariat.” But the appeal of the Black Panthers had less to do with such Marxist-inspired vocabulary and more to do with their innovative and infectious aesthetics of confrontation. Black Panthers donned black leather jackets, dark sunglasses, and black berets atop large if neat Afros. Their omnipresent logo of a sleek, powerful black panther springing into action signified the angry spirit of Malcolm X’s ghost. And most extraordinarily, the Black Panthers openly exercised their Second Amendment rights by carrying guns in public. White New Leftists mimicked the Black Panther aesthetics of confrontation by adopting the Black Panther term *pigs* as a catchall moniker for cops and other authority figures, including university administrators. But despite the white New Left’s flattery by imitation, the Black Panthers, like the larger Black Power movement, emphasized that their goal was not racial integration but rather black self-determination. In this way they agreed with other cultural nationalists about the importance of learning a specifically black history, or, in the words of the Black Panther Party’s “Ten-Point Program,” “our true history.”²⁶

The Black Panthers struck a chord. “By the late 1960’s,” historian Manning Marable writes, “the Black Panthers had become the most influential revolutionary nationalist organization in the U.S.” Even more telling was the response by J. Edgar Hoover, the longtime director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who epitomized the repressive side of normative America. In a 1970 report written for President Nixon, Hoover labeled the Black Panther Party “the most

active and dangerous black extremist group in the United States.” Such threatening rhetoric was anything but idle. The Black Panthers were the targets of 233 out of a total 295 counterintelligence operations directed at black political groups during that era. FBI infiltrators even helped sow discord between the Black Panthers and US, which led to a deadly 1969 shootout between the two groups on the University of California–Los Angeles campus. The Black Panther Party’s confrontational approach proved a self-fulfilling prophecy, resulting in a demise accurately reflected in the title of Huey Newton’s 1973 memoir, *Revolutionary Suicide*. And yet the legacy of the Black Panthers cannot be reduced to such failure. They contributed to the irrepressible spirit of rebellion that transformed how millions of people viewed normative America and their place within it.²⁷

Black Power and the other identity-based movements of the sixties underscored new forms of knowledge, a new intellectual agency in relation to oppression that might be termed an epistemology of liberation. In doing so these movements created new ideas about identity. Identity was something to be stressed; it was something to grow into or become. Only by becoming black, or Chicano, or a liberated woman, or an out-of-the-closet homosexual—and only by showing solidarity with those similarly identified—could one hope to overcome the psychological barriers to liberation imposed by discriminatory cultural norms. Becoming an identity—identifying as an oppressed minority—meant refusing to conform to mainstream standards of American identity.

As opposed to normative America, black nationalists found solidarity in international anticolonial movements. If they saw the American nation as good for anything, it was as a launching pad for their diasporic struggles. The “third world” shaped the worldviews of Black Power leaders like Malcolm X, Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael, and Robert F. Williams. For the latter two, such moral geographical commitments became physical: Carmichael relocated to Guinea and changed his name to Kwame Turé; Williams fled federal agents to a life of exile in Cuba and China. In this spirit, Black Power advocates viewed identity politics as nothing less than revolutionary. Some of the more revolutionary anticolonial thinkers likewise had displayed elements of identity in their politics. These included the renowned Argentinian doctor and Cuban revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who became a global icon of rebellion. In his classic 1953 memoir of his

prerevolutionary travels across South America, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Guevara displayed attentiveness to identity as a liberating force. Critical of education “according to the white man’s criteria,” he believed that only by virtue of Indian or mestizo identity could one grasp “the moral distance separating” Western civilization from a once proud indigenous civilization. Although the young Guevara of *The Motorcycle Diaries* accentuated political economy, anticipating his later turn to communism, he also emphasized “spreading a real knowledge of the Quechua nation so that the people of that race could feel proud of their past rather than . . . ashamed of being Indian or Mestizo.”²⁸

Even more than Che, Frantz Fanon was arguably the most important thinker to the “third world” revolutionaries in the United States. Cleaver, for instance, claimed it was Fanon who showed him that American blacks were part of the vast colonized peoples of the world. At first glance, it would seem that Fanon eschewed identity politics. He concluded his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* on a universal note that rejected racial identity: “The Negro is not. Any more than a white man.” In his seminal 1963 book *The Wretched of the Earth*, an anticolonial text par excellence, he criticized black nationalist celebrations of ancient African civilization. But Fanon also recognized such racialized expressions of history and culture as necessary first steps in severing ties with colonial power, especially since the representatives of Western civilization “have never ceased to set up white culture to fill the gap left by the absence of other cultures.” In short, cultural identity was integral to Fanon’s existentialist musings on “the experience of a black man thrown into a white world.” In this his position resembled Richard Wright’s well-known response to Bandung, where Wright called for a “reluctant nationalism” that “need not remain valid for decades to come.” Both Fanon and Wright joined the Second Congress of the Negro Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959, dedicated to the “peoples without a culture,” a mission aligned with one of Fanon’s more famous dictums: “The plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and the course of freedom.” No wonder Black Power activists were known to carry tattered copies of Fanon’s books around with them.²⁹

Harold Cruse, another intellectual who helped shape Black Power, argued in his 1967 tour de force *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* that the role of black intellectuals was to reconceptualize black identity as independent of white society. The objective of black thinkers was

to gain control of those “cultural institutions” responsible for representing black history and culture. Fashioning identity politics as realism, Cruse wrote: “The individual Negro has, proportionately, very few rights indeed because his ethnic group (whether or not he actually identifies with it) has very little political, economic or social power (beyond moral grounds) to wield.” Carmichael and Hamilton made a similarly nationalistic argument in their book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, also published in 1967: “Group solidarity is necessary before a group can effectively form a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.” Such thinking highlights a crucial difference between the white and black New Lefts. Against the anti-nomianism of the white New Left, especially in its countercultural expressions, which made individual expression sacrosanct, Black Power thinkers saw the need to conform to a collective black identity.³⁰

That Black Power theorists understood black identity as crucial to their struggle does not entail that identity was simply something to celebrate. Rather, accurate conceptions of blackness in relation to whiteness helped them make better sense of racial inequality and, more generally, the American political economy. In *Black Power*, Carmichael and Hamilton upended decades of social science by drawing a critical distinction between personal and “institutional racism.” As opposed to personal racism, bigotry easily condemned by enlightened whites, institutional racism, the insidious ways in which the American social structure favored whites over blacks, “originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation.” The most glaring case of institutional racism was the American system of property appraisal, in which houses in white neighborhoods received higher value ratings. Given the cultural significance attached to home ownership in the United States, not to mention the long-term economic advantages, it was no wonder Black Power activists lamented living “in a society in which to be unconditionally ‘American’ is to be white, and to be black is a misfortune.” By coining the analytical category “institutional racism,” Carmichael and Hamilton showed that the Black Power turn to cultural analysis was not necessarily a reductionist rejection of economic thought. Rather, the attention to racial identity ushered in an innovative hybrid approach—bringing together cultural and economic analysis—that became the bedrock of leftist and academic thought.³¹

Less prominently than the Black Power movement, but just as

effectively, the Chicano movement trumpeted a similar brand of collective identity politics. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales was one of the more eloquent spokespersons for “Chicanos,” a label embraced by those Mexican Americans who practiced identity politics. Gonzales directed the Crusade for Justice, a Chicano activist group based in Denver with a mission to foster “a sense of identity and self-worth” among Mexican Americans. Both in his speeches and in his poetry Gonzales persistently emphasized that improvements to the Mexican American condition would require group solidarity and cultural awareness. Speaking to a group of college students in 1969, Gonzales complained that so many Mexican Americans identified with “the Anglo image” instead of with Aztlán, his term for the Mexican Diaspora. It was imperative, he pleaded, to “admit that we have a different set of values.” Chicanos needed to be more aware of “their cultural attributes, their historical contributions, their self-identity and most importantly their self-worth.”³²

Gonzales’s epic 1967 poem *I Am Joaquín* mixed hyperattention to Chicano identity with countercultural tropes about alienation. Joaquín, representative of Aztlán, existed “in the grasp of American social neurosis.” “Unwillingly dragged by that monstrous, technical industrial giant called Progress,” Joaquín recalled venerable rebel leaders of the Mexican past—Benito Juárez, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata—in order to symbolically resist “a country that has wiped out all my history, stifled all my pride.” Identity was Joaquín’s battleground. “I am the masses of my people, and I refuse to be absorbed.” *I Am Joaquín* “was a journey back through history,” according to Gonzales, “a painful self-evaluation, a wandering search for my peoples, and, most of all, for my own identity.” In the words of Carlos Muñoz, founding chair of the nation’s first Chicano studies program at California State University–Los Angeles, “the most significant aspect of *I Am Joaquín* was that it captured both the agony and the jubilation permeating the identity crisis faced by Mexican American youth in the process of assimilation.” In other words, the constraints and prejudices of a normative American identity pushed Chicanos to theorize alternative identity formations.³³

Like the intellectual advocates of Black Power, Gonzales did not view Chicano nationalism as narrow or inhibiting. “Nationalism is a tool for organization not a weapon for hatred,” he wrote. Gonzales saw Chicano nationalism as a stepping-stone to an international move-

ment of oppressed peoples, in turn a springboard to universal human liberation. However, there was a proper order of struggle, and the particular preceded the universal. "Dealing only within our own sphere of involvement," Gonzales argued, "we must teach on a grassroots level and identify with our own self worth and historic ties." "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," created by Gonzales and the other participants in the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, hosted by the Crusade for Justice in 1969, expressed how sixties identity politics mixed cultural nationalism with more universal, even anticapitalist desires: "Our cultural values of life, family, and home will serve as a powerful weapon to defeat the Gringo dollar value system and encourage the process of love and brotherhood."³⁴

Because Gonzales believed that his fellow Mexican Americans needed a shift in consciousness, he prioritized education in his activism. He led a walkout of Mexican American students at Denver West High School in March 1969 to pressure the Denver school board to "enforce the inclusion in all schools of this city the history of our people, our culture, language, and our contributions to this country." The students also demanded "that payment for the psychological destruction of our people, i.e., inferiority complexes, anglo superiority myth, rejection of our own identity and self worth, . . . be settled by a free education for all Mexican American youth from Headstart through college." In a letter to Crusade for Justice members in 1973, Gonzales praised Chicano movement advocates as "the forerunners in the battle for positive and relevant education for Chicanos." He was especially proud of the "Chicano Studies Programs sprouting in the universities that provide income for Chicano Study experts." In sum, theories about Chicano identity and nationalism, as propounded by Gonzales and others, were crucial to the formation of Chicano studies in universities. The same was true of black studies.³⁵

The first department of black studies was formed at San Francisco State College in 1969 in response to a large student protest known as the Third World Strike. Most of the earliest black studies programs were established in reaction to black student protests. At San Francisco State College and elsewhere, student protestors were almost always Black Power activists, whose strong presence on campuses across the United States in the late sixties ensured the birth of black studies. Shortly after founding the Black Panther Party, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton worked to establish black studies at Merritt College

in Oakland in 1967 on Fanon's premise that a genuine national culture was necessary to break the chains of colonialism. They believed African Americans constituted an internal colony and that independence demanded cultivating black nationalist institutions such as black studies programs. Black Panther Jimmy Garrett, who helped lead the Third World Strike in San Francisco, hosted Black Power reading groups at his house, where "we would talk about ourselves, seeking identity." "A lot of folks," a bewildered Garrett reflected, "didn't even know they were black. A lot of people thought they were Americans."³⁶

The vigilantes of Americanism reacted to black student protest with hostility. Reagan routinely condemned Third World Strikers. San Francisco State College president S. I. Hayakawa, heeding Reagan's calls to quit coddling militant college students, disrupted a Third World Strike rally by pulling the wires out from a student loudspeaker. Elsewhere, authorities quashed student protests with increasingly draconian force. This was particularly true where black students were historically few in number, such as at the University of Illinois in downstate Urbana-Champaign, where the student body was over 98 percent white as late as 1966. When Illinois administrators took steps to admit more black students, due to federal laws that required affirmative action at public institutions, tensions erupted. In September 1968, 250 black students, mostly from Chicago, where black nationalism had deep roots, were arrested for a sit-in at the student center. Many of those arrested were expelled from the university. Yet the protests were not a total failure. In order to defuse such unrest, administrators approved the creation of a black studies program. Much to their chagrin, the program remained firmly committed to the Black Power tradition even after the larger movement died out, as a 1981 overview of the program's mission made clear: "The study of the Black Experience is to develop means for achieving liberation—freedom from oppression—and self-determination for Black people."³⁷

Chicano studies developed along a similar trajectory. As with black studies, the key early moments in establishing Chicano studies revolved around student protest, especially the East Los Angeles walkout by high school students in March 1968 led by Sol Castro. According to Carlos Muñoz, who helped Castro organize that protest and later led the push for Chicano studies on campuses, "The major purpose of the Los Angeles walkouts was to protest racist teachers and school policies, the lack of freedom of speech, the lack of teachers

of Mexican descent, the absence of classes on Mexican and Mexican American culture and history, and the inferior education provided to Mexican American students." Muñoz remembers the movement as "a quest for identity, an effort to recapture what had been lost through the socialization process imposed by U.S. schools and other institutions." For this reason Muñoz and other Chicano movement leaders, understanding "the need to take on that socialization process," prioritized Chicano studies as one institutional response to what he terms the "identity problematic."³⁸

The passions and methodologies of the Black and Chicano Power movements informed the activism of other minority groups, especially in California, where peoples of "black, brown, yellow, and red" backgrounds endowed the New Left with a remarkable diversity. The Japanese American poet Amy Uyematsu wrote a formidable 1969 essay, "The Emergence of Yellow Power," about an emerging movement for Asian American liberation that she claimed had been set into motion by the Black Power movement. Uyematsu argued that Asian Americans, like blacks, were victims of "white institutionalized racism" and thus had to free themselves from the ideological shackles of normative white America. Asian Americans, she said, were "beginning to realize that this nation is a 'White democracy' and the yellow people have a mistaken identity."³⁹

The American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in 1968 with a similar mission, made weightier by the fact that it sought liberation for the only ethnic group indigenous to the North American continent. Such a thirst for long-denied freedom informed the Native American activists who occupied Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay on November 20, 1969. The goal of the nearly two-year occupation was to compel the federal government to give American Indians control of the island and allow them to convert the former location of an infamous prison into a center for Native American Studies. "Red Power" activists, those whom *The Nation* magazine called "Our Most Silent Majority"—a riff on Nixon's label for the presumably white, middle-class majority of Americans who supported his presidency—thought it was a small price for white America to pay in return for centuries of broken treaties.⁴⁰

The combined forces of these movements for ethnic liberation congealed into another massive student strike in 1969, this time at the University of California's Berkeley campus. Although the official response

to this second Third World Strike was draconian—Governor Reagan sent in the National Guard to break it up—the protestors won the sympathy of many of their fellow students. And Berkeley faculty even voted to join the strike unless the university created an ethnic studies department. The university gave in to the pressure. In 1969 Berkeley became home to the nation’s first department of ethnic studies, and San Francisco State College became home to the nation’s first and only College of Ethnic Studies. University chancellor Roger Heyns wrote a statement admitting that the state’s system of higher education had failed to incorporate the experiences of racial minorities into the curriculum. The upshot of all this activism: radical identity movements had planted permanent institutional beachheads on the enemy territory otherwise known as white normative America. Those were heady times.⁴¹

Radical identity politics also animated the young activists of the women’s liberation movement. Like ethnic identity activists, feminists pioneered academic programs—women’s studies—that rejected traditional forms of American socialization. To get to that point, feminists had come a long way in a short time. A few years prior, feminists took their cues from less militant liberals like Betty Friedan, author of the 1963 instant classic *The Feminine Mystique*. After surveying her fellow Smith College alumni, Friedan argued that despite the material comforts of suburbia, middle-class women tended to suffer from symptoms of depression, what she famously named “the problem that has no name.” Reflecting the cultural turn taken by social critics in an age of affluence, Friedan, formerly a labor reporter who called herself a socialist, made clear that economic security alone did not satisfy human wants, especially those of highly educated women barred from elite professions. From 1966 until 1970, Friedan served as the founding president of the National Organization of Women (NOW), which eventually blossomed into the largest feminist organization in the United States. NOW attracted tens of thousands of members thanks to its successful record of lobbying to “bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now.” But for radical feminists who rejected mainstream America, such liberal reformism was too tepid. In contrast, radical feminists—in contemporary nomenclature, the women’s liberation movement—sought to subvert American institutions, such as the traditional family, on the grounds that they were hopelessly patriarchal.⁴²

In spite of the women's liberation movement's efforts to distance itself from liberal feminism, its principles pivoted from similar cultural tendencies. Just as Friedan made the psychology of housewives a political issue, radical feminists theorized that relations between the sexes, no matter how intimate, needed to be reformulated in political terms. Feminists of all varieties staked a claim to the enduring slogan "The personal is political," the title of Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay that first appeared in a pamphlet distributed by Redstockings, a radical feminist group founded by Shulamith Firestone and Ellen Willis. Despite such similarities, radicals went much further than liberals in politicizing the personal. By undertaking what they called "consciousness-raising," a popular tactic of the women's liberation movement, radical feminists brought awareness to how the seemingly mundane stuff of everyday life could repress women. As Hanisch wrote, consciousness-raising "forced [her] to take off her rose colored glasses and face the awful truth about how grim my life really is as a woman." Radical feminists formed consciousness-raising groups, where activists helped their sisters relate their individual difficulties to the larger problem of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Their concrete personal narratives served to illustrate the abstract political concepts of feminist theory. "We regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience," according to the Redstockings manifesto, "as the basis for an analysis of our common situation."⁴³

Although radical feminists are remembered for inventing "The personal is political," the idea behind the phrase grounded the political philosophy of the New Left from its outset. In 1959 C. Wright Mills had argued that people could connect their "personal troubles to public issues" by learning how to think about a subject from multiple perspectives—an analytical style that owed to what he called "the sociological imagination." Tom Hayden, putting his own sociological imagination to work in writing the Port Huron Statement, contended that alienation resulted from a politics that denied individuals the freedom to find "meaning in life that is personally authentic." Many radical feminists learned how to think about personal politics as members of various New Left organizations, especially SDS and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This was ironic, of course, since politicizing the personal, taken to its logical conclusion, led many women to believe that the New Left organizations to which they belonged were chauvinistic. Stokely Carmichael's

notoriously misogynistic quip that “the position of women in SNCC is prone” symbolized the need for women to prioritize their own liberation.⁴⁴

Robin Morgan’s political transformation was indicative of the trajectory that brought women of the New Left to radical feminism. Morgan began writing for New Left publications in 1962. Throughout the decade, she was dedicated to ending the Vietnam War and even briefly joined forces with the Yippies. But beginning in 1967, she expanded her activism to include women’s liberation, helping to found New York Radical Women, which protested the Miss America Pageant in 1968. Soon after committing to women’s issues, Morgan’s notions about radical politics metamorphosed. “No matter how empathetic you are to another’s oppression,” she wrote, “you become truly committed to radical change only when you realize your own oppression.” In 1970 Morgan joined a group of women who took control of *Rat*, a New Left newspaper known for its sexism, by staging a coup. In a 1970 essay, “Goodbye to All That,” she publicly severed ties with the New Left in poetic fashion: “We have met the enemy and he’s our friend.” Morgan had grown incredulous that so many of her comrades persisted in avoiding women’s issues, such as rape and child care, which they denounced as too “bourgeois.” In contrast, Morgan contended that patriarchy was the world’s “primary oppression,” a common theoretical move made by women weary of being relegated to secretarial duties in a movement supposedly seeking universal human freedom.⁴⁵

Naming patriarchy as the most pervasive hierarchy in world history was central to the epistemology of women’s liberation. Nobody was more explicit about this than Kate Millett, author of the groundbreaking 1970 book *Sexual Politics*. Millett theorized that “unless we eliminate the most pernicious of our systems of oppression”—patriarchy, with its “sick delirium of power and violence”—“all our efforts at liberation will only land us again in the same primordial stew.” Taking her cues from Simone de Beauvoir, Millett contended that whereas male identity was understood to be normal, “woman” was reified as a sexual object. “Nearly all that can be described as distinctly human rather than animal activity,” as Millett pointed out, “is largely reserved for the male.” Millett posited that if women consented to patriarchal constraints it was because they had been conditioned to assume that certain gender norms were natural. The revelation that gender was

malleable had a liberating effect on feminists. If gender could be made, then it could also be unmade.⁴⁶

Unmasking patriarchal gender norms was common practice in the women's studies programs that burst onto college campuses in 1970, when the first program was created at San Diego State College. From there the number of women's studies programs quickly mushroomed: by 1976 there were 270, and by 1981 there were a whopping 350 programs nationwide. Along with black, Chicano, and ethnic studies, women's studies grew as an offshoot of the sixties identity movements. Feminist activists undertook to implement women's studies programs in order to institutionalize women's liberation. In 1969 Cornell University organizers invited Millett, then an unknown doctoral student, to campus to read from her unfinished manuscript *Sexual Politics*. Listening to Millett's jarring analysis of patriarchy evoked new political desires among many of the women in attendance, catalyzing their struggle to create a women's studies program at Cornell. Armed with a newfound political consciousness, women's studies aimed, as the Hunter College Women's Studies Collective put it, to "examine the world and the human beings who inhabit it with questions, analyses, and theories built directly on women's experiences." In other words, campus feminists integrated consciousness-raising into the academic curriculum, consistent with the epistemology of liberation that animated the identity movements of the New Left. Beyond liberating, women's studies scholars also deemed consciousness-raising pedagogically necessary since until then women had largely been erased from the university curriculum. Women's experiences were one of the only sources of knowledge with which to build a new curriculum.⁴⁷

Consciousness-raising was not the sole preserve of women's liberation. It was also a formative tactic of the gay liberation movement that exploded after the Stonewall Riot. On the night of June 27, 1969, eight policemen emerged from the Stonewall Inn, a popular Manhattan gay bar, with several prisoners in tow, whom they sought to load into a paddy wagon. What seemed like a routine police raid on a technically illegal gay bar was transformed into an event of lasting significance when a crowd of angry onlookers ignored orders to disperse and loudly encouraged those held captive to resist arrest. Badly outnumbered, the police took shelter back inside the bar, ceding the street to the indignant mob. The confrontation calmed down later that

night, but as word of the astonishing event spread the next day, thanks to abundant press coverage, which included a front-page story in the *New York Times*, gays began to gather again outside the Stonewall Inn. By early the next evening, a huge crowd had amassed, tinged, as gay rights activist Craig Rodwell described it, with a “real anger by gay people that was just electric.”⁴⁸

Stonewall was a watershed moment in the history of gay rights. When Allen Ginsberg saw “Gay Power!” scrawled on the Stonewall Inn two nights after the initial riot, he told a reporter: “We’re one of the largest minorities in the country — 10 percent, you know. It’s about time we did something to assert ourselves.” Inside the bar that night, which had been cleaned up and reopened, Ginsberg noticed that the patrons had “lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago.” A New York City police officer in charge of “public morals” echoed Ginsberg when he claimed that gays suddenly were “not submissive anymore.” The dominant tone of gay activism had shifted from demurring to confrontational. The Mattachine Society, the nation’s most prominent homophile organization prior to 1969, relied upon liberal heterosexual allies to speak on behalf of gay rights, since most of its members were hesitant to publicly pronounce themselves gay. Such reticence was logical, of course, given the cultural stigma attached to homosexuality — a stigma reflected by the American Psychological Association (APA)’s designation of homosexuality as pathological. Exemplifying the new militancy, post-Stonewall activists disrupted APA meetings, nudging it to remove homosexuality from its list of disorders in 1973.⁴⁹

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) best represented the “gay liberation movement,” the new name for post-Stonewall gay rights activism. In contrast to earlier activists, the founding members of GLF, mostly veterans of the New Left, were cultural radicals by disposition. In this the gay liberation movement was emphatically within the New Left milieu. But more than that, gay liberation represented the full flowering of New Left sensibilities. Against the bedrock traditions of heterosexual America, openly declaring oneself gay was an act of considerable transgression, a politicization of the personal to a radical new degree. That some of the most renowned New Left intellectuals were homosexuals, such as Ginsberg, James Baldwin, and Paul Goodman, was emblematic of a gay inclination to chip away at repressive American norms that inhibited individual freedom. Being publicly

gay “branded one’s consciousness with a marker of difference,” in the words of historian John D’Emilio. “It necessarily made one perpetually aware of separation, of division in the body of humanity, of marginalization and ostracism.” In this way, the history of gay liberation is essential to understanding how the New Left transformed American culture.⁵⁰

Just as Robin Morgan’s biography illuminates how many New Left women found their way to radical feminism, a biographical sketch of Karla Jay, a founding GLF member who later became a professor of women’s studies, demonstrates how gay liberation both emerged from the New Left and was its culmination. Jay grew up in a conservative Jewish household where, because heterosexuality was assumed, sexuality in general was never spoken about, leaving her incapable of making sense of her sexual inclinations. Jay belatedly learned that homosexuality was taboo during her freshman year at Barnard College in 1964, when two of her classmates at that female-only school were expelled for having sex in their dorm room. Not surprisingly, she hid her sexual identity until years later. As the sixties wore on, Jay’s politics grew increasingly radical. In 1968 she participated in rowdy Columbia University protests against the institution’s expansion into nearby black neighborhoods and in opposition to its military-sponsored research. But like so many other women, Jay grew convinced that sexism plagued the New Left, so she joined Redstockings. In a Redstockings consciousness-raising group, she finally came out of the closet as a lesbian. “Coming out” as a political tactic elevated consciousness-raising to a new level of importance for gay liberation. “Speaking freely and honestly to other gays in the protected atmosphere of a consciousness-raising session,” Jay explained, would, in theory, “ramify outward” to obliterate the heteronormativity at the core of traditional American identity. “We want to reach the homosexual entombed in you,” as Martha Shelley told Americans in her canonical essay “Gay Is Good.”⁵¹

If gay liberation represented the apex of sixties-era liberation for some, for others it signaled the decline of Western civilization. D’Emilio draws upon a pithy analogy to explain this declension narrative: “We might as well be reading Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the classic eighteenth-century work that tied Rome’s collapse to sexual immorality.” Conservatives were those most likely to take a dim view of gay liberation. But they

were not alone. Many on the Left implicitly connected the decline of organized labor to the rise of gay liberation and the other identity movements of the New Left. This was most evident in responses to George McGovern's 1972 campaign for presidency, which ended in a landslide loss to Nixon. Even though McGovern had a near perfect voting record on labor issues while a senator, and even though he had long been genuinely interested in labor concerns, having written a doctoral dissertation on the infamous Colorado Coal Strike of 1913 and 1914—the strike that resulted in the tragic Ludlow Massacre—the most powerful unions never rallied to his support. This included the massive American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), led by cigar-chomping George Meany. Meany not only abstained from supporting the McGovern campaign but also implicitly aided Nixon's reelection efforts by tarring McGovern as a lackey of the identity movements that many white male unionists believed had captured the Democratic Party.⁵²

Labor's disenchantment with McGovern grew out of its anger at him for heading the reform commission that overhauled the demographic composition of the Democratic Party delegation. When youthful party insurgents failed to stamp their imprint on the party platform in 1968—a failure that was due, they determined, to the corrupt delegate system, with its “secret caucuses, closed slate-making, widespread proxy voting, and a host of other procedural irregularities”—these so-called “New Politics” Democrats had struck back by forming the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection. The net effect was to open up the party delegation to young people, minorities, women, and gays, while dislodging many of the old guard, mostly the white men of organized labor. Whereas 2 percent of the delegates to the Chicago convention in 1968 were younger than thirty, 23 percent of the delegates were that young at the Miami convention in 1972. Similarly, black representation increased from 5 percent to 14 percent. And both the women's and gay liberation movements “found expression in the campaign,” in the words of McGovern aide Bob Schrum. As opposed to 1968, when 14 percent of the delegates were women, 36 percent of the Miami delegates were women, most of them active in the feminist movement. Similarly, gays gained a foothold in the party for the first time, particularly in New York, as that state's delegation included eight gay rights activists, as compared, astonishingly, to only three delegates from the ranks of organized labor. The McGov-

ern campaign, much like some Hollywood programming, and much like black, ethnic, and women's studies programs, exemplified how sixties liberation movements gained an institutional foothold in liberal America.⁵³

The sexual revolution also signaled that the sixties liberation movements had ushered in new cultural sensibilities. From its outset, of course, the sexual revolution meant different things to different people. To radical feminists, it signified their refusal to be "exploited as sex objects," as proclaimed by a 1969 Redstockings manifesto. But to many other young Americans, the sexual revolution was less about equality and more about liberty—more about ending the constraints that rendered sex taboo. This libertarian side of the sexual revolution was indeed revolutionary. Public morality came out of the sixties much less prudish. Universities abandoned *in loco parentis* duties, including imposing curfews and separating the sexes. Public censors lost their firm grip on popular culture, owing in part to an increasingly permissive Supreme Court, which ruled in its 1966 "Fanny Hill" decision that a cultural product could be branded obscene only if it was thought to be "utterly without redeeming value." Such a precedent, which set the bar for censorship high, enabled the popularization of hypersexual films theretofore confined to the underground. *The Chelsea Girls*, Andy Warhol's otherwise banal 1966 film, packed theaters across New York City due to its graphic depictions of sex, "as if," one critic imagined, "there had been cameras concealed in the fleshpots of Caligula's Rome." By the late sixties, Americans increasingly expected controversy, even obscenity, when they frequented movie theaters. In 1972 the pornographic film *Deep Throat* stormed the country, briefly inspiring a highbrow fascination with pornography remembered as "porno chic."⁵⁴

The fruits of the libertarian sexual revolution could be felt nearly everywhere. The Sexual Freedom League, which grew in numbers and notoriety after *Time* magazine featured it in a 1966 article, hosted thinly disguised orgies it dubbed "nude parties." Philip Roth became a literary celebrity on the heels of *Portnoy's Complaint*, his 1969 novel about Jewish American identity that doubled as an ode to adolescent masturbation. *Joy of Sex*, a 1972 sex advice book that included graphic illustrations, sold millions of copies and spent over fifty weeks near the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. Norman O. Brown gained acclaim by endowing the sexual revolution with a patina of

philosophical rigor: by repressing our common desire for “polymorphous perversity,” Brown theorized, humans had unwisely chosen to side with the languid trappings of “civilization” over the deliverance promised by “eroticism.” The libertine side of the sexual revolution seemed complete, evident in *New York Times* editor Anthony Lewis’s cocksure assertion that “the Philistines are on the run.”⁵⁵

Television, if not quite “wallowing in sex,” the lament of one industry executive, incorporated the new sexual morality. By the 1970s, popular shows like the situation comedy *Three’s Company* and the light drama *Love Boat* seemed indicative to Americans raised on *Leave It to Beaver* that primetime television was a veritable fleshpot. But perhaps more troubling, television programming also, in more limited fashion, absorbed themes drawn from the feminist side of the sexual revolution. Norman Lear’s situation comedy *Maude*, which aired on CBS from 1972 to 1978, starred Beatrice Arthur as Maude Findlay, a thrice-divorced, outspokenly liberal forty-seven-year-old woman. *Maude* spun off from another Lear production, *All in the Family*, a wildly popular show about the family of working-class rube Archie Bunker, played by Carroll O’Connor. The Maude character had first appeared on *All in the Family* as Archie’s hapless wife Edith’s opinionated cousin, described by Lear as “the flip side of Archie.” “Maude breaks every rule of television from the start,” said CBS president Robert Wood. “It’s not so long ago that you couldn’t show a woman divorced from one husband, let alone three.” Divorce was not the only hot-button issue *Maude* tackled. In November 1972, just months before *Roe v. Wade*, Lear dedicated two episodes—“Maude’s Dilemma”—to the topic of abortion. After discovering, incredibly, that she is pregnant, Maude agonizes about whether to abort her unplanned pregnancy. In the end, she heeds her feminist daughter Carol’s advice and goes through with the abortion, thereupon convincing her fourth husband to acquire a vasectomy. Immediately following the broadcast of “Maude’s Dilemma,” Lear and CBS were besieged with angry phone calls and letters. Catholic organizations called *Maude* “open propaganda for abortion and vasectomy.” Several local affiliates chose not to broadcast reruns of “Maude’s Dilemma,” including in Boston, where the station manager proclaimed, “[T]here is nothing particularly funny about a 47-year-old woman getting an abortion.”⁵⁶

Beyond Catholic fears about the liberalization of abortion, the fuss over “Maude’s Dilemma” reflected more generic anxieties about the

empirical decline of the traditional family, as measured by rising rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, premarital sex, and nonmarital cohabitation. The angry reaction to *Maude* was also symptomatic of concerns about female empowerment. Of course, these two sets of fears—about family declension and female liberation—were not mutually exclusive. Divorce became more frequent partly as a consequence, at least initially, of no-fault divorce laws that feminists had long supported as a tool for women to escape abusive marriages. The conservative political movement for “family values” that came to life in the 1970s thus should be seen as a reaction to one of the many ways in which the New Left had recast American political culture. Conservatives fought for their definition of the good society, for their traditional, normative America, by resisting New Left sensibilities. In fact, the reactionary forces that aligned against the New Left, forces that included a diverse range of people, suggest that the sixties were indeed liberating. Or at the very least, it shows that the sixties liberation movements—the New Left, broadly construed—lobbed the first shots in the culture wars that would come to define late-twentieth-century American political culture.⁵⁷