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After spending decades griping that academics neglected them, conservatives can’t complain now that the Right is a regular object of study for political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and, as in Heather Cox Richardson’s case, historians. ‘To Make Men Free: A History of the Republican Party’ covers the Grand Old Party from its founding in the 1850s to today. She characterizes that history as a struggle between two tendencies or ideologies that uneasily coexist inside the GOP: the first is a drive to offer opportunity or social mobility to average Americans. As she puts it, the Republican Party was formed to make sure that all hardworking Americans could rise.” Pitted against this is a contrary impulse favoring “[r]ich men who sought to monopolize land, money, or the means of production.” This struggle matters because its outcome has often determined whether America has charted a progressive course or one that is not simply reactionary but destructive, given that the ambitions of the wealthy “were undermining the natural harmony of economic interests and endangering the entire country.”

A professor at Boston College, Richardson associates the progressive Republican impulse with Abraham Lincoln, above all. He offered federal land grants for the construction of a transcontinental railroad, transferred federal land to states to create what would become land-grant colleges, passed the Homestead Act, which offered federal land to farmers, and assaulted the “property” rights of the Southern plantation elite by liberating their slaves. For Richardson, these policies helped spawn a tradition of legislation, regulation, and government program-building aimed at broad-based economic development and promotion of social mobility, one carried forward by Theodore Roosevelt, who busted trusts, and Dwight Eisenhower, who embraced the New Deal legacy and built the interstate highway system.

Lined up against Lincoln, T.R., and Eisenhower in this book are William McKinley, the robber barons of the Gilded Age, Calvin Coolidge, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and, more generally, the “Movement Conservatism” that has dominated the GOP since the 1960s. These right-wingers stood for low taxes, rigid protection of private property rights, and as little regulation of business activity as possible, which in her view contributed not only to concentrations of wealth and power, but also to economic disasters including the 1873 recession, the Great Depression, and the 2008-09 financial crisis.

In Richardson’s telling, Movement Conservatism’s control of the GOP is virtually complete. If the larger history of the party is a struggle between opportunity and property, it seems property has won decisively, at least for now. It is important to say “for now,” because her story is one of wide swings across time. But at least for now, the worst elements are in charge.

What is more striking are three things she does not even address. First, Richardson never explains what causes the pendulum swings between the party’s progressive and reactionary wings. She suggests that 19th-century Republican presidential candidates needed New York’s Electoral College votes, and catered to Wall Street to get them. That portrays political influence as driven by interests. But this clashes with her depiction of post-1960s Movement Conservatism as animated overwhelmingly by ideas. If we don’t know what causes each party faction to wax and wane, how do we know the pendulum will swing again (as she hopes)? Perhaps it is driven instead by the nature of the GOP’s competition with its Democratic opponents, in which case it is a mistake to discuss the evolution of the GOP in isolation.

Second, and more important, although the book is predicated on the assumption that there is a zero-sum relationship between the interests of rich Americans and the aspirations of average citizens, Richardson never makes the case for it. Her images of class warfare, exploitation, and opportunity-hoarding don’t really fit the U.S. economy since 1945, especially as services, skills, and technology have played increasing roles. If she is right, it follows that signature postwar conservative proposals like lowered inflation, more liberal trade rules, more sophisticated antitrust practices, lower regulatory barriers to entry, tax limitation, and reduced growth rates in domestic government spending—all of which surely favored wealthy Americans—must have come at the expense of the middle class. That doesn’t sound right. Isn’t it just as plausible that at least for the past half-century, though certain policies might favor only the rich and certain other policies might favor only the mobility of the less-advantaged, many policies promote the interests of both wealthier and other Americans? And is it crazy to suggest that the Republican Party maintains its large and complex cross-class coalition in part by advocating the sorts of economic policies that simultaneously advance the interests of upper middle-class, middle-class, and many lower middle-class Americans? Richardson doesn’t even consider the possibility. In ‘To Make Men Free,’ it’s always 1935 and the “economic royalists” denounced by Franklin Roosevelt are running rampant.

Third, Richardson doesn’t ask whether and how government intervention in the economy promotes social mobility. She never claims outright that all government economic programs have that effect, but she defends government activism in general, without ever specifying which programs might promote mobility and which might not, whether some promote it in some eras or circumstances but not others, and which (if any) are at risk of getting corrupted or becoming counterproductive. The impression is that governmental activism alone prevents stagnation and worse. But we have many counter-examples. Although regulatory barriers to entry were meant to protect consumers,
in many cases they ended up subsidizing powerful industries at consumers' expense. Free marketers who opposed these regulations and called for their reform or abolition were eventually joined, beginning in the 1970s, by liberals like Senator Edward Kennedy and Justice Stephen Breyer. Was this coalition serving the interests of plutocrats by cutting back on the regulation of business? The proliferation of licenses for various occupations, too, was meant to protect consumers, but has had the same results: empowering “insiders,” exploiting consumers, and, in this case, limiting options for people effectively shut out of many lower-class and middle-class careers. Movement conservatives are virtually the only people calling for serious reform in this area (including the new governor of Texas, Greg Abbott). Agricultural price supports and the now mandated consumption of ethanol have very dubious effects on the pocketbooks of average Americans. Bloat and costly public sector employment is competing for scarce state and municipal dollars with libraries, infrastructure, and public safety. Whose interests are being served in that competition? Do subsidies for “green energy” favor social mobility, or line the pockets of Democratic Party cronies? What about the minimum wage? Why is Richardson certain that big minimum wage hikes favor the poor rather than nudging more and more of them out of the labor force? Her class warfare narrative just doesn’t account for evidence and counter-evidence of that kind.

Consider tariffs, which were a major issue for much of the period covered in this book. When Richardson acknowledges that pre-1930s Republicans favored tariffs, she doesn’t seem to give them any progressive credit for it. But when she blames the Great Depression on the reactionary policies of those same Republicans, she also never quite includes tariffs in the list of factors that contributed to the disaster. After all, if tariffs don’t help the little guy but instead have perverse and even negative-sum effects, then what about other big-government policies? Calls for their reform might not be so reactionary after all. But she marches on as if unaware of such a possibility. She doesn’t merely make certain assumptions (we all do that), she feels no need to engage with those who have different assumptions. How is that possible in this day and age, when robust debate on such matters spills across the internet in ways accessible to all? A contrast might help explain it.

Last year, French economist Thomas Piketty published Capital in the Twenty-first Century, which warned of deepening economic inequality in Western democracies and proposed sweeping redistributionist policies to address the problem. The book became a cause célèbre among liberals and progressives, and was so widely discussed—in basically every major and minor mainstream media outlet—that conservatives simply had to respond to its evidence, arguments, and prescriptions. Two years earlier, Richard Sander, a respected law professor (and economist) at the University of California at Los Angeles, and Stuart Taylor, Jr., perhaps the nation’s most prominent legal journalist, published Mismatch: How Affirmative Action Hurts Students It’s Intended to Help, and Why Universities Won’t Admit It. Their book offered extensive evidence that affirmative action admissions practices at elite law schools are distinctly harmful to their supposed beneficiaries, resulting in fewer minority lawyers than if the students had attended law schools at which their test scores and grades were more closely matched to the median student. They showed that this dynamic extended to programs other than law, and that university leaders consistently stuck their heads in the sand rather than grappling with what their own internal numbers showed was a serious problem.

In other words, Mismatch provides a data-rich and controversial argument about one of the most controversial topics of our time. So how did liberals and progressives respond? Mostly by ignoring the book. Tellingly, neither the New York Times nor the Washington Post reviewed it.

The contrast between Capital and Mismatch illustrates an unfortunate truth. When liberals demand a national conversation about economic inequality, they have the cultural power to start it and shape it. Conservatives do not. Heather Cox Richardson operates inside that liberal cocoon: the 1980’s economic boom had nothing to do with Ronald Reagan’s policies; defending private property is the moral equivalent of justifying slavery. Throw in independent counsel Kenneth Starr’s investigation of the Clinton scandals, George W. Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” banner, and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh’s inspiration from anti-government rhetoric, and you have a good rant going. Although they may no longer be neglected by academics, conservatives will still have to wait for the day their arguments are taken seriously.

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