

The Contemporary American Conservative Movement

Neil Gross,¹ Thomas Medvetz,² and Rupert Russell³

¹Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z1, Canada; email: ngross@interchange.ubc.ca

²Department of Sociology, University of California-San Diego, La Jolla, California 92093; email: tmedvetz@ucsd.edu

³Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138; email: rhrussel@fas.harvard.edu

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Abstract

The American conservative movement that began to gain steam in the post–World War II era had, by the 1980s, emerged as a transformative political force in the United States and the world. Yet sociology has been slower than other disciplines to come to grips with conservatism. In the hope of spurring more research, we review the substantial literature on the conservative movement produced by historians, political scientists, and serious journalists since the mid-1990s, along with the more limited number of sociological contributions. After identifying what we see as a promising approach for conceptualizing conservatism, we illustrate the benefits of sociological engagement by showing how three areas of sociology that might at first glance seem disconnected from the movement—the sociology of intellectuals, theories of social change, and scholarship on stratification—could profit from consideration of the conservative case.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2010, when we sat down to write this article, the high hopes of liberals and progressives that the election of President Barack Obama signaled the beginning of the end of conservative political influence in the United States were being dashed. Health-care reform legislation had passed in the spring, expanding insurance coverage, but reaction against it helped energize the fiercely small-government Tea Party Movement, with which nearly a fifth of voting-age Americans claimed to identify (Zernike & Thee-Brenan 2010, Zernike 2010). While opinion polls showed the percentage of Americans describing themselves as liberal to have risen in the past few years (Saad 2010), the same polls showed twice as many self-identified conservatives as liberals in the population. With the economic recovery stalled, political scientists were busy forecasting a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in the upcoming midterm elections (Bafumi et al. 2010). In Arizona, highly restrictive legislation cracking down on illegal immigrants had passed in April. Although the constitutionality of the bill was in dispute, polls showed that 51% of Americans approved of it and that 9% thought it did not go far enough (Archibold & Thee-Brenan 2010). Meanwhile, on the popular culture front, books by conservative commentators and political figures such as Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin remained fixtures on best-seller lists. These developments may or may not confirm the thesis of British journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge (2004) that at its core America is a “right nation,” but they sent many on the left scrambling to figure out why Obama’s election had not been more of a turning point and why conservatism continued to have such a grip on the country.

Those looking to the academic literature for answers found ample resources on which to draw. In 1994, historian Alan Brinkley observed that “the American right has [not] received anything like the amount of attention from historians that its role in twentieth-century politics and culture suggests it should” (Brinkley 1994,

p. 409). In the years since, historians stepped forward to answer Brinkley’s call, producing, along with political scientists and other scholars, a rich body of research and writing about American conservatism. Unfortunately, sociology has been largely absent from this intellectual endeavor. To be sure, as we describe below, sociologists have occasionally written about various facets of American conservatism, including the antiabortion movement, class voting and support for Republican candidates, the politics of Christian fundamentalism, and the causes and consequences of neoliberal economic reforms. But, with a few important exceptions (e.g., Diamond 1995, 1998), this work has been carried out in isolation from scholarship on other aspects of conservatism, whether by sociologists or researchers in other fields, resulting in a failure to develop a comprehensive sociological view of the American right. What is more, the proportion of sociologists studying conservatism or conservatives is small. For these reasons, sociology has not been in a position to lend much of its distinctive voice to important conversations on the topic.

None of the three authors of this article is a conservative. But we nevertheless think it imperative to move sociology toward greater interest in the American conservative movement. From the vantage point of the present, Brinkley’s assessment of American politics and culture and the conservative movement’s place in them appears truer than ever: The consequences of the rise of the movement for American life—and the world—over the past half-century have been profound. Conservatives arguably played key roles in dismantling the New Deal-era welfare state; in scaling back the unionization of American workers; in strengthening in other ways the hand of industry, raising American economic competitiveness, and at the same time likely exacerbating social inequality; in pursuing geopolitical strategies of containment that thrust the nation into war but also hastened the downfall of the Soviet Union; in bolstering conservative strains of Protestantism, yielding a major reconfiguration of American religion;

in blunting the efforts of left social movements around gender, race, sexuality, and the environment; in dramatically reducing funding for the arts, altering the American cultural scene; and much more. A movement with effects of this scope and magnitude should be front and center in sociological research, not at the margins.

In the hope of nudging the discipline in this direction, we review the expansive history and political science literature on American conservatism that has appeared since the mid-1990s, along with contributions by serious journalists and the limited number of sociological studies of the right. Our aim is not to produce the comprehensive sociological view of the movement we think is called for—such a project would require a great deal more research and synthesis—but is simply to familiarize sociologists with the empirical contours of American conservatism and suggest some ways that further study might lead to disciplinary advance. In keeping with the latter goal, our review is organized around three important topics of sociological investigation that could benefit especially from greater engagement with conservatism (although in our view research in many areas could so benefit). We say less about those few subfields, such as the sociology of religion, that are already somewhat engaged (see Brint & Schroedel 2009, Emerson & Hartman 2006, Manza & Wright 2003). We preface our discussion by considering various approaches to conceptualizing conservatism, offering our own corrective approach, and conclude by highlighting some of the challenges facing future research in the area.

Four caveats are in order before we begin. First, although some of the literature we review treats American conservatism in comparative perspective, our focus is squarely on the United States. Analyzing the similarities, differences, and relationships between and among American conservatism and its approximate counterparts in Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and elsewhere is worthwhile, but readers will not find here an analysis of world conservatisms. Second, although some of the historical studies we describe trace the long

history of American conservatism, in some cases reaching back to show its ideological roots in the writings of thinkers such as Edmund Burke or Alexis de Tocqueville, our main focus is on American conservatism from the post-World War II era until today. Third, the bulk of our review examines books and articles about mainstream American conservatism—about its most prominent and powerful figures, organizations, constituencies, ideas, and struggles. Fringe groups on the right, such as white supremacist militia organizations, do not figure in our account except insofar as we attend to interactions between these groups and mainstream political actors. This, along with the fact that we are as interested in party politics as in the activities of social movements, distinguishes our article from Blee & Creasap's (2010) recent piece in this journal, which attends closely to the far right. Fourth and finally, because of space constraints we are unable to deal adequately with the multidisciplinary nature of the works we review. Historians, political scientists, journalists, and sociologists have different aims and inhabit different "epistemic cultures" (Knorr-Cetina 1999). Putting these differences aside, we have assimilated all the works we consider into the framework of sociology, asking what they have to teach sociologists about the American right.

WHAT IS AMERICAN CONSERVATISM?

In an often-quoted line, literary critic Lionel Trilling observed in 1950 that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation" (p. ix). Trilling did not mean to deny that many Americans considered themselves conservative, that religious and economic elites could frequently be found pulling the levers of power to block advancements from the left, or that nativist movements of the right had long reared their heads. But a clearly delineated American conservative movement organized around a more or less coherent set

of ideas was not in evidence in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Nor had such a movement existed at any time during the New Deal era, when liberalism, then widely understood as committed to progressive expansion of what T.H. Marshall (1950) famously called “political, civil, and social citizenship,” was ideologically ascendant and politically powerful, if not without internal tensions (Borgwardt 2005, Brinkley 1995, Fraser & Gerstle 1989). However, not long after Trilling made his comments, the early rumblings of an American conservative movement could be felt. As we describe below, this occurred as conservative intellectuals began “mixing a heady brew of anticollectivist thought” (Critchlow 2007, p. 13)—publishing their ideas in popular books and newly founded magazines—and as Senator Joseph McCarthy’s campaign against suspected communists and communist sympathizers heated up. Many observers concluded that a discernible political shift was taking place.

In his introduction to the 1955 volume *The Radical Right*, Daniel Bell—a future neoconservative, at least on some accounts—described this shift as a “turbulence” (Bell 2002 [1955], p. 47) and laid down the first of three definitions of modern American conservatism that we consider, one with which his coauthors readily agreed: The book would take as its object those individuals and groups who “sought to impose older conformities on the American body politic” (pp. 47–48), attempting to stuff a rapidly changing American society back into the box of a white, theologically conservative, small-town vision of the good. In defining the emerging movement in this way, as a political effort to turn back the clock on social change, Bell and others in the volume did much to shape future research. Although most contemporary scholars of social movements reject the theory of status politics that accompanied the definition—the theory that conservatives belong to social groups that are declining in status and are motivated politically to counter the decline (see Lo 1982)—the notion that conservative movements endeavor to restore the status quo ante remains influential; for

example, it animates work on “countermovements” (Meyer & Staggenborg 1996), one of the main conceptual umbrellas under which sociological research on conservatism is carried out (e.g., McCright & Dunlap 2010, Pichardo 1995). In this view, the contemporary American conservative movement might be thought of as a collection of issue-based countermovements under the broad umbrella of the Republican Party, arising in reaction to and with the aim of reversing recent progressive social and historical developments, such as the “minority rights revolution” (Skrentny 2002). The view that conservatism is anchored by resistance to change also finds expression in recent studies by political and social psychologists, revisiting the claims of *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), who argue that conservatives tend to share certain psychological traits, such as “uncertainty avoidance; intolerance of ambiguity; needs for order, structure, and closure; perception of a dangerous world; and fear of death” (Jost & Hunyady 2005, p. 261; see also Napier & Jost 2008).

A second approach, taken mainly by scholars of political economy, notes that most of the individuals, groups, and organizations labeled conservative in the postwar United States have been supporters of free market capitalism. Although some of their efforts to shape public policy can be analyzed through a countermovements lens (see, e.g., Dixon 2010), the presumed goal of these efforts is not a piecemeal return to some prior historical state. Rather, the aim is wholesale installation of a particular kind of economic system, one that is distinctly forward looking in being geared to the dynamics of contemporary capitalism. Political economists do not doubt that free market ideas come to be seen as dogma by many conservatives, but they tend to assume that material interests, not rigid intellectual commitments or status concerns, explain support for conservatism among economic elites. If interclass alliances between economic and social conservatives often develop, then this is something to be explained, typically by invoking traditional Marxist notions of ideology in which economic elites use racial

divisions, religion, and other cultural resources to stoke fear within and generate the loyalty of the working class (e.g., Frank 2004, Toplin 2006). However important such alliances may be in electoral terms, for these scholars contemporary American conservatism remains, at its core, about what Prasad (2006) calls “the politics of free markets.”

A third approach is evident in the work of some historians who write about conservatism, as well as in several prominent sociological studies of the Christian right. Against the idea that American conservatism reflects merely opposition to this or that progressive social trend or policy development, and against the claim that it is all about economics, scholars in this camp suggest that American conservatives share a moral worldview rich with intellectual content. Thorne (1990, p. 8), for example, writes that “all contemporary American conservative thinkers hold two fundamental ideas: a certain view of human nature and a certain conception of...moral order. They believe that human nature is unchanging and unalterable...[and] that there exists an objective moral order...[that] includes standards and principles that are real, immutable and eternal.” According to Thorne, this intellectual “core” of American conservatism “influences conservative thinking in all areas” (p. 8). For their part, many sociologists studying the Christian right also discern a coherent worldview and set of values underlying conservatives’ religious and political commitments (see Brint & Schroedel 2009; Klatch 1987; Luker 1984; Wuthnow 2005, 2009), notwithstanding the fact that conservative Christians do not form a homogeneous political bloc (Greeley & Hout 2006, Smith 2000). The view of conservatism signaled in these studies is rooted in a larger culturalist understanding which holds that terms such as conservative and liberal acquire their meanings not in an exclusively political context but within networked “value communities” spanning multiple institutional settings (Coleman & Hoffer 1987; see also Lakoff 1996).

Although each of these three definitions has formed the basis for useful research, in our view they are all problematic. The first approach, while correctly apprehending that American conservatives have often understood themselves as agents of social preservation (as per William F. Buckley’s famous quip that conservatives are those who “stand athwart history, yelling ‘Stop’”), falsely presumes that it is possible for the social scientist to specify objectively what counts as liberal or progressive social change, with conservatism defined negatively against it. As we elaborate below, the definitions of liberalism, progressivism, conservatism, and other ideological stances are constantly in dispute among actors in the political field and beyond. The second definition, which views the right primarily in terms of economic ideas and interests, likewise captures one of the major themes of conservatism as it has appeared in the United States over the past half century. At the same time, it unjustifiably relegates social conservatives to a subsidiary role in the movement’s history and proceeds on the basis of questionable assumptions about their political manipulability. The third definition, while furnishing a useful corrective to the highly economic vision implied in the second, tends to assume intellectual or valuational coherence among conservatives rather than treating its achievement as a contingent outcome to be explained.

At a more general level, the definitions listed above are all built on the assumption that conservatism can be characterized in terms of a fixed or stable essence. The main problem with this assumption is that it tends to foreclose certain analytic possibilities that we regard as indispensable to a rigorous social scientific investigation of the right. Central among these is the study of the social and historical dynamics through which particular understandings of conservatism emerge and are contested, crystallize, diffuse, and become institutionalized. In light of this problem, we offer an alternative analytic strategy informed by Bourdieu’s work on reflexivity (2004) and the political field

(1991) and the more general “relational” turn Bourdieu helped inspire (see Emirbayer 1997). The key to our approach is to set aside, for methodological purposes, the search for the single true essence of conservatism and focus instead on the social relations through which particular meanings come to be defined as conservative within a given sociohistorical milieu, as well as on the processes through which individuals, groups, and movements come to adopt these meanings as their own and mobilize around them. In this view, conservatism is not a fixed category of belief or practice but a collective identity that evolves in the course of struggles and collaborations over meaning, primarily though not exclusively within the realm of politics. At the same time, we would insist that analysts attend to the objective social structures that form in relation to this identity—including the networks, formal organizations, and patterns of association that work to ensure its social transmission and powerfully constrain the meanings that may attach to it at any given moment. Our approach therefore leaves open the possibility—indeed, the probability—that there will be observable continuities in the moral or ideological content of conservatism over time. Hixson (1992), reviewing 30 years’ worth of social science research on the right, is correct that in postwar America the meaning of conservatism has tended to revolve around certain signature themes: Conservatives “were hostile to the expansion of the welfare state and advocated the restoration of an unrestricted ‘free market’; they remain[ed] concerned with domestic subversion long after McCarthy had passed from the scene; they... favor[ed]... ‘rollback’ of the power of Communist states...; they generally opposed the civil rights agenda of the 1960s; and they much more sharply rejected the goals of the women’s movement of the 1970s” (Hixson 1992, p. xv). However, as Trilling’s comment suggests, there was little consensus about what conservatism entailed in the New Deal era, and we should expect revisions of these themes as conservatives reinvent themselves in accord with twenty-first-century realities.

Although this analytic approach is not likely to satisfy anyone who has come to this article in search of a handy operational definition of the term conservative, in a sense this is precisely our point: It is the researcher’s duty to determine empirically where the category’s boundary lies in any given sociohistorical setting. Among the many social processes that help to determine the placement of this boundary are the group-making activities of those who identify themselves as conservatives, as well as oppositional efforts by the left to diminish the appeal of conservatism by marking it as an irrational or immoral ideology—efforts that find their counterpart in negative depictions of the left by the right. For this reason, our view is that approaches to conservatism that focus in an essentialist way on resistance to change, relentless conformity, or free market policies that line the pockets of the rich all suffer from an additional problem not listed above. To the extent that they paint the motivations, interests, and characteristics of conservatives with a single, unflattering brushstroke, they are scientific-cum-political attempts at ideological caricature and form part of the very terrain of cultural contestation that should be central to the social-scientific investigation of politics.

CONSERVATISM AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF INTELLECTUALS

It may seem odd to begin our substantive discussion of conservatism with a treatment of intellectuals. On the one hand, survey data and historical evidence suggest that since the early years of the twentieth century most Americans whose occupational roles are closely connected with the production of knowledge—academics, scientists, writers, journalists, and so on—have been affiliated with the political left (Brint 1985, Gross & Simmons 2007, Ladd & Lipset 1975). On the other hand, conservatism has often been seen as an anti-intellectual ideology, one that values practical know-how and common sense over intellect (Hofstadter 1963) while also being hostile to science (Mooney 2005).

Nevertheless, one of the main propositions implied in the conceptual approach developed above is that conservatism is as dependent on processes of meaning-making and collective identity formation as any other political movement. Because much of the meaning-making work in movements falls to intellectuals, benefits might accrue to the sociology of intellectuals if greater attention were paid to conservative men and women “of ideas” (Coser 1965).

Three intellectual networks in particular have attracted attention from scholars of the American right. The first is the loosely connected group of libertarian thinkers whose origins can be traced to mid-twentieth-century academic critiques of Keynesian economics (Carey 1984, Doherty 2007). In the wake of the New Deal and its European counterparts, and the growth of state socialism, the free market theories of Austrian School economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek attracted the support of what was then a fringe movement within the economics profession. Meeting periodically through international organizations such as the Mont Pelerin Society (Mirowski & Plehwe 2009), free market economists secured an important beachhead on American academic soil when Hayek moved from London to join the University of Chicago faculty in 1950. In the United States, laissez-faire economics found a philosophical ally in writer Ayn Rand and the small circle of intellectuals surrounding her (Burns 2009, Doherty 2007). For thinkers in this orbit, diminished government involvement in the economy was not simply a means to greater economic efficiency and productivity, but also a good in itself insofar as state regulation in any sphere was seen as a “road to serfdom” (Hayek 1944).

The second network is the neoconservatives, the small but influential band of former Trotskyists who came of age intellectually in New York City in the 1940s (Diamond 1995, Ehrman 1995, Gerson 1996, Peele 1984, Steinfels 1979). The early neoconservatives were Jewish intellectuals who became hard-line anticommunists in their encounters with other Marxists at City College (Friedman 2006).

Among them were Bell and Irving Kristol, who founded the influential magazine *The Public Interest* in 1965, and Norman Podhoretz, who began editing *Commentary*, a major organ for neoconservative thought, in 1960. It was in the context of the Vietnam War, and in reaction to the perceived excesses of the New Left and President Johnson’s Great Society programs, that the neoconservatives became disillusioned with the Democratic Party. By 1980, they had thrown their support behind Ronald Reagan in protest of Jimmy Carter’s policies on Israel and the Soviet Union (Ehrman 1995). As the first generation of neoconservatives gave way to the second, the movement became more diffuse. The Iraq War prompted renewed interest in the philosophical roots of neoconservative foreign policy (Norton 2004) and the movement’s overall influence (Friedman 2006, Fukuyama 2006, Halper & Clarke 2004, Heilbrunn 2008).

Spanning these two intellectual networks were several thinkers who saw their contribution in promoting cohesion among the right’s various fractions. The main figures in this effort were Buckley, James Burnham, Frank S. Meyer, and Russell Kirk, who in 1955 launched *National Review* (Hart 2005, Schneider 2003). Meyer became the leading proponent of “fusionism,” an effort to reconcile tensions among conservatism’s competing strands. For the emerging right, the main tension was between traditionalists—a diverse group that included Burkean intellectuals who stressed the value of traditional Christian institutions and Western culture and who have generally been given less attention in the secondary literature—and libertarians. Whereas traditionalists were sometimes comfortable using government to police morality, libertarians were staunchly opposed (Carey 1984). Meyer sought to bridge the divide by emphasizing what all American conservatives ostensibly had in common: patriotism, opposition to economic collectivism and communism, a concern with the preservation of states’ rights, and recognition of moral objectivity (Adler 2004). Although they would show communists no mercy, fusionist conservatives would not rely heavily on the

state to enforce moral strictures. Instead, they would reduce the scope of government so as to promote individual freedom, while also championing institutions that could bolster traditional morality, such as the family and church. Working along similar lines, Kirk (1953) laid out a coherent vision for modern conservatism in his book *The Conservative Mind* and in the journal *Modern Age* (Nash 1976). Finally, in his own writings and his support for Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), a fusionist student political organization founded in 1960 (Andrew 1997, Schneider 1999), Buckley also took up the project of reconciliation.

Discussions about the thinkers comprising these networks sometimes entertain doubts as to whether they were “truly” intellectuals. According to older sociological definitions of the term, such as Shils’s (1972, p. 3) claim that intellectuals are “persons with an unusual sensitivity to the sacred” who feel a marked “need to penetrate beyond the screen of immediate concrete experience,” the answer is ambiguous. Some might be—the highly philosophical Meyer, for example—while others would fail to qualify. But the main reason for the ambiguity is that older work on the sociology of intellectuals smuggled a political litmus test into its analytical frame. Scholars such as Karl Mannheim, Antonio Gramsci, and Max Weber were well aware that intellectuals could hail from the right as well as the left (as in Mannheim’s 1986 [1925] classic essay on nineteenth-century conservatism) and were as essential to the systematization of religious orthodoxy and the legitimation of social and political hierarchies as to revolutionary movements. But mid-twentieth-century scholarship often proceeded from the assumption that there is a basic tension between “intellectuals and the value orientations embodied in the actual institutions of any society” (Shils 1972, p. 7). The view that conservative thinkers who might staunchly defend the status quo were not perforce intellectuals reached its apotheosis in Chomsky’s (1969) rebuke of the “new mandarins” and Said’s (1994) definition of the true intellectual as a thinker who “speaks

truth to power.” Yet two lines of analysis in the sociology of intellectual life argue for a more politically neutral approach. Drawing on more recent work in the sociology of science and knowledge, Camic & Gross (2001, p. 237) argue that for sociologists the term intellectual should be stripped of moral content and used to describe all those who, regardless of the substance of their beliefs, are “relatively specialized in the production of scientific, interpretive, moral, political, or aesthetic ideas.” Similarly, Eyal & Buchholz (2010, p. 117) note that while the sociology of intellectuals once focused on a particular social type, and along with it a particular “mode of intervention into the public sphere,” more recent work “multipl[ies] the relevant actors and depersonalizes the term ‘intellectual’ so that it no longer stands for a social type but for the capacity to make a public intervention” (p. 120). According to Eyal & Buchholz, one of the main advantages of this shift is that it opens the sociology of intellectuals to historical analysis of struggles over who has the right to speak authoritatively on given issues, as well as over how much status should be accorded to thinkers occupying different institutional locales and with differing dispositions and endowments of intellectual capital.

We favor these more recent definitional approaches, aligning as they do with our relational approach to conservatism, but believe that current scholarship on intellectuals has yet to benefit fully from consideration of the conservative case. We mean this in two respects. First, while some scholars of intellectual life have written about select groups of academics who contributed to the rise of the right, such as economists (e.g., Babb 2001, Fourcade 2009), few have recognized the extent to which the evolution of the American intellectual field as a whole in the second half of the twentieth century was bound up with the conservative movement. During this period, conservative institutional entrepreneurs built or expanded a host of new sites for knowledge production. They were driven largely by perceptions that existing knowledge institutions were in the thrall of liberalism and would prove hostile to

forms of intellectual work seen as necessary to support the conservative cause. Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential bid was a major turning point here. Despite his lopsided defeat in the general election, the nomination signaled that conservatives had wrested control of the Republican Party from its northeastern establishment figures (Perlstein 2001, Rae 1989). Energies could now be directed toward producing symbolic weapons usable in concrete political battles with the left. Then attorney Lewis Powell's infamous 1973 memorandum to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in which he reported that a "broad attack" on the "American economic system" was under way, was one of several attempts by prominent conservatives to create durable alliances with businessmen. Citing the dominance of liberal elites in the "college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, [and] the arts and sciences," Powell urged business leaders to fund new institutions to develop and disseminate conservative ideas. Among the many organs in the conservative "counter-establishment" (Blumenthal 1986) that grew partly in response to such pleas were legal foundations, such as the National Center for the Public Interest and the Pacific Legal Foundation (Teles 2008); academic business schools and free market-oriented departments of economics (Fourcade & Khurana 2008, O'Connor 2008); colleges with conservative political agendas such as Liberty University; and television shows, such as Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose* and Ben Wattenberg's *In Search of the Real America*. As we discuss below, conservatives also invested heavily in the development of think tanks, designed to put forward policy recommendations and move public debate to the right (Callahan 1999, Critchlow 2007, Krehely et al. 2004, McGann & Johnson 2005, Rich 2004, Stefancic & Delgado 1996). Chief among these was the Heritage Foundation, formed in 1973 by two former Republican legislative aides, Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner, with a grant from beer magnate Joseph Coors (Bjerre-Poulsen 1991, Edwards 1997). The social-ecological conditions that proved favorable to

these institution-building efforts, what kind of intellectuals were recruited to fill the new roles, what practices of "social knowledge-making" (Camic et al. 2011) conservative intellectuals enacted, and how patterns of intellectual jurisdiction and authority were reconfigured as new institutions appeared on the scene are rich questions for sociologists of intellectual life to take up. These questions speak to late-twentieth-century changes in the social organization of knowledge no less significant than those that have received the bulk of sociological attention to date, such as commercialization—which, admittedly, is linked to neoliberalism (see Frickel et al. 2011, Kleinman 2003)—or the rise of interdisciplinarity (Jacobs & Frickel 2009).

Second, close study of the conservative case might lead to better understanding of the role of intellectuals in political movements—especially with respect to the construction of group identities. While the point was neglected in early versions of resource mobilization theory, much recent sociological work emphasizes that successful collective political action requires that actors share a relatively circumscribed yet culturally flexible and emotionally evocative collective identity (for reviews, see Bernstein 2005 and Polletta & Jasper 2001). Although in some instances movements may arise on the basis of preformed identities, the identity work carried out within a movement is often essential in fostering solidarity among members and mobilizing those with no immediate incentive to participate in collective action (Klandermans 1997, Lichterman 1996, Reger et al. 2008, Teske 1997). Among other things, collective identities reflect moral boundaries, both within and between groups (Gamson 1992, Taylor & Whittier 1992), and help movements frame their grievances, goals, and tactics (Armstrong 2002, Bernstein 1997) and navigate the performative complexities of struggles and campaigns (Alexander 2010).

While it is well recognized in the movements literature that intellectuals—traditional and especially popular—are often vital to movement success because they are skilled identity workers, the in situ practices by which

intellectuals carry out identity work have barely begun to be explored. The American conservative movement stands as an interesting case in this regard. It was indeed intellectuals who carved out a viable identity for the movement and reconfigured that identity in response to changing cultural and political circumstances. Yet this was not a seamless effort, and their experiences raise important questions and point to broader lessons. For example, efforts at bringing together libertarians and traditionalists under the banner of fusionism were not merely academic exercises, but also highly motivated and intensely debated attempts at giving conservatism a coherent meaning that could appeal to multiple groups and enable coalition building. How did conservative intellectuals reconcile the practical demands of this form of labor with their prior intellectual commitments? When, later, evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants became crucial to the right's success, the theological particularities of, and differences among, the many conservative factions posed a further challenge. Often it fell to denominational intellectuals, including ministers, to clarify a group's relationship to the broader movement (Allitt 1993, Bruce et al. 1995), which raised complex coordination issues, not least because at this point in the movement's history the Republican Party had become a central player in all such efforts. Beyond the challenge of coalition building, conservative intellectuals had to overcome yet another hurdle early on: defining conservatism in a way that would not seem elitist, given both the explicit elitism of many traditionalists and the obvious benefits to the rich of an antire-distributionist agenda. Writers like Buckley ingeniously solved this problem by redefining the concept of elites: The danger in America lay not in great concentrations of wealth, but in the growth of a political and cultural elite—a new class, centered in the Northeast—that was more cosmopolitan than patriotic (Hixson 1992), soft on communism, driven to favor ill-fated social engineering schemes, and supportive of pernicious social trends like secularization. Articulated during a time of

rapid expansion of government and higher education, these themes struck a chord, and conservatism was rebranded as a form of populism (Crawford 1980, Ehrenreich 1987, Nunberg 2006). A related concern for conservative intellectuals was to establish conservatism's legitimacy and respectability. The extremism of some conservatives, such as popular speaker Major General Edwin Walker, the rabid anticommunist targeted for assassination by Lee Harvey Oswald, or Robert Welch, founder of the controversial John Birch Society, proved an obstacle (Schoenwald 2001). So conservative intellectuals jumped once more into the fray, engaging in finely wrought efforts to distance the movement from what were portrayed as reactionary fringe elements (Bjerre-Poulsen 2002, Brennan 1995).

As important as this work was, even more important to the movement's first major electoral gains were efforts to forge a collective identity in response to events of the 1960s and 1970s. These years are known to sociologists as a time of left social movement activity, but they also saw the right coming to life organizationally. Conservative college students flocked to groups like YAF, enraged by the disruption they saw on their campuses; traditionalists opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment rallied behind Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA campaign (Critchlow 2005); Southern whites defected to the Republican Party; and Western suburbanites mobilized in response to perceived moral degeneration in the counterculture. In each case, intellectuals had a crucial part to play in diagnosing the "cultural trauma" (Alexander et al. 2004) and indicating support for the conservative movement as the appropriate response. In the years following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, for example, *National Review* columnists such as Willmoore Kendall, a former political philosopher at Yale, could be found arguing against forced desegregation (which proved a major impetus for conservative mobilization, notwithstanding the point we make below that recent historical work questions whether this was the main cause of party realignment in the South) on the grounds

that it represented an attempt by an arrogant judiciary to transform the country before it was ready (Hart 2005, p. 100). The Free Speech Movement, which began at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1964, was likewise the subject of frequent and sharp reproach by Buckley, who viewed it as symptomatic of the same indulgences of liberal academic culture he had highlighted in his book *God and Man at Yale* (Buckley 1951), which was a best seller (especially in New Haven). The critique of academic culture became a rallying point for the conservative movement, a grievance shared by all YAF members, and a major component of Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign in California in 1966. These moves represent an important and as yet untapped data source for sociologists of intellectual life looking to establish whether identity work in political movements takes on special qualities when it is carried out by intellectuals as opposed to other activists, when the movements in question are large scale and marked by an elaborate division of labor, and when the intellectuals involved are of a conservative persuasion.

THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE RISE OF THE RIGHT

A second topic of sociological investigation that stands to benefit from the recent flurry of research on the conservative movement is social change. Sociology has always been as interested in social dynamics as in social statics: in the conditions under which and the processes through which significant social changes come about. Change has been a particular concern of political and historical sociologists, "relentlessly focused" on such dynamic phenomena as "revolutions, peasant revolts, strikes, [and] movements of all kinds" (Patterson 2004, p. 73). But it is no less a concern of cultural sociologists (e.g., Crane 2000, Griswold 1983, Lena & Peterson 2008), scholars of economic life (e.g., Aldrich & Ruef 2006, Carruthers & Espeland 1991), sociologists of religion (e.g., Wuthnow 2007) or development (e.g., Biggart & Guillén 1999), and many others. Given the heterogeneity of the

change phenomena sociologists have examined, it is not surprising that little effort has been put into developing general theories of social transformation. Yet it is a commonly accepted criticism of reproduction-centered theories, such as structural-functionalism, that they do not attend adequately to change, which has as its corollary that theoretical frameworks should be able to encompass and explain social change in general.

We think an important new frontier for the discipline is the development and assessment of general theories of social change and nominate the rise of the American right in the postwar era as a highly significant case that might be used to think through the merits and limitations of various theoretical building blocks currently on offer. As an instance of change, the rise of the right offers several analytic benefits. One is complexity: The phenomenon spans multiple social domains, as we describe shortly, permitting consideration of a wide array of causal processes. Another benefit is that the ascendance of American conservatism has been dramatic and consequential yet not entirely discontinuous in sociostructural terms. This means that it is not atypical of social changes in the contemporary period, as are the revolutions and related phenomena often studied under the banner of "eventful" social science (Sewell 2005). While our approach to conservatism cautions against automatically treating conservative movements across national contexts as instantiations of the same social phenomenon, a further advantage of using American conservatism to examine social dynamism is the availability of roughly comparable data on political movements and party politics in other countries. Finally, the sheer quantity of empirical work already carried out—again, mostly by nonsociologists—offers a benefit, providing grist for the social-theoretical mill.

But what do we mean by the rise of the right? In keeping with the relational approach outlined above, we refer to a historically situated process of group-making and mobilization comprising the emergence of the national conservative movement described in earlier

sections of this review; the growth of more or less stable and interlinked political organizations and institutions aligned with it; the increasing number of Americans who identified as conservative over the course of the twentieth century; the heightened salience of ideological themes identified as conservative in contemporary political discourse; the newfound power of conservative Republicans to win political office at the local, state, or national levels; and the degree to which that power has been used to shape public policy. To note that the right has risen is to claim not that conservative Republicans dominate American politics, but that they are routine contenders for power to an extent unthinkable during the New Deal era.

What brought about this social transformation? While we would expect future work on change to highlight a multiplicity of variables, mechanisms, and processes, we illustrate our claim that the conservative movement is good for theorists of change to think with by organizing our discussion of the rise of the right—a major topic in the literature this article reviews—around four broad factors differentially emphasized in competing accounts of social dynamism.

One prominent set of theories traces new developments in the sphere of politics, culture, or social organization back to material conditions. Rooted primarily (though not exclusively) in Marxism, arguments as to the material roots of social change can be found in scholarship on the history of the world system (Arrighi 1994, Hall & Chase-Dunn 2006), in comparative-historical accounts of state building focused in part on the dynamics of capital accumulation (Tilly 1986, 1992, 1995), in approaches to contemporary society that highlight technological developments or new patterns of global trade and interconnection (Castells 2010; Giddens 1991, 2002), and elsewhere.

Consistent with this line of analysis, a good deal of research on the rise of the right emphasizes economic causes. Berman (1998), for example, argues that the “liberal welfare state” of the postwar years “was predicated on a[n]...arrangement whereby corporate

America provided high wages; the federal government stimulated the investment process; and each, in its own way, supported a variety of social programs that enhanced the purchasing power of American workers” (p. 13). When this broke down, due to runaway inflation in the 1970s and the emergence of a global economy that cut into corporate profits and incentivized capital mobility, accelerating deindustrialization, liberalism lost support among both workers and business elites. While doubting whether such support was ever really lost among American voters (on this point also see Hacker & Pierson 2005), Ferguson & Rogers (1986, p. 82), for their part, identify various economic conditions, especially “sharper competitive pressures from abroad,” under which business began to withdraw from the New Deal coalition. Arguments about the role of a “faltering economy, rising deficits and increasing individual and collective insecurities in a postindustrialized and globalized marketplace” can be found in Schultze et al.’s (2003, p. 17) analysis of conservative movements in Canada and the United States, in international work on the growth of the far right and the xenophobia linked to it (see Rydgren 2007), and in Himmelstein’s (1990) account of American conservatism, where profit-squeezed businesses are portrayed as amenable to mobilization.

Why Republicans benefitted more than Democrats from the economic troubles of late-twentieth-century capitalism is discussed at length in Smith’s (2007a,b) theory of the role of rhetoric in American politics. In a related vein, though with more skepticism about culture as an intermediary causal factor, Prasad (2006) explains the rise of neoliberalism, understood in terms of diminished state growth rather than welfare retrenchment, as a consequence of the OPEC-induced oil crisis of 1973. Like Berman, Prasad argues that the crisis presented opportunities for groups pushing free market ideas but adds that such opportunities were mediated by institutionalized political structures and arrangements dating to earlier in the century. Finally, while recent decades have witnessed significant increases in economic inequality, as

we discuss below, on average household incomes have grown since the 1960s, and Brooks & Brady (1999) present evidence that this has helped the Republican cause. Flush household coffers during the 1980s, they report, “added, on average, 10% to Republican presidential victories” (Brooks & Brady 1999, p. 1362) during that decade.

Without doubting that large-scale social changes are often linked to economic shifts, a second group of theorists, with more of a Weberian provenance, recognizes the central role of culture—of values, beliefs, representations, practices, and worldviews—in bringing about social transformation. There are many examples of such work. Gorski’s (2003) account of early modern nation-state formation fits the mold. Inglehart’s (1997) “postmaterialism” thesis, though predicated on a claim about growing affluence, is similarly attentive to culture, glossed as values, which he sees as seeding transformative social movements. From a different vantage point, culture is key as well in Bourdieu’s often unacknowledged theory of social change. For Bourdieu (1988 [1984], Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), transformative social crises erupt when exogenous shocks alter the structure and logic of social fields, creating a mismatch with the cultural dispositions in which actors are invested.

Only occasionally have scholars of the American right drawn explicitly on such theories, but many explain the right’s success by pointing to cultural factors. Racial boundaries and beliefs loom large in many of these accounts. For Rieder (1985, 1989), for example, 1960s-era liberalism began to unravel, ushering in the conservative ascent, as Southerners and ethnic whites in the Northeast withdrew from the Democratic coalition. This occurred, he argues, in reaction to the civil rights movement, which found powerful allies in Democratic politicians and a liberal judiciary. As Rieder sees it, for working-class whites in the North especially, racial animosity was less to blame here than was the fact that many working-class voters subscribed to an ideology of “bootstrapping” with which affirmative action and welfare

policies were in tension, stoking resentments (on this point, also see De Leon et al. 2009, pp. 210–12). A similar argument is developed by Sugrue & Skrentny (2008), who posit that not the civil rights movement but black militancy in the 1960s and efforts to appease it delegitimated, in the eyes of working-class whites, social policies designed to help African Americans overcome historical disadvantage. This delegitimation reduced confidence in Democratic governance—a turn prefigured, according to Sugrue (2005), by racial tensions in northern cities like Detroit dating to the 1940s. Moving forward in time, many observers have likewise detected racial overtones in debates in the 1980s and 1990s about welfare, immigration, and criminal justice policy (Ansell 2001, Garland 2001, Hill Collins 2004). Edsall (1992; also see Edsall 1984, 2006) takes a more blunt approach, arguing that the defection of Southern whites not just from the Democratic Party but from the ideology of liberalism generally was key to conservatism’s success. This defection, he claims, had everything to do with civil rights, desegregation, and straightforward racial antipathy: “Without the underlying issue of race, the Goldwater movement would have been unable to alter fundamentally the structure of the Republican presidential nomination process, and in so doing, to transform the Republican party” (p. 42). Edsall’s claim receives support from Carter’s (2000) study of George Wallace, Perlstein’s (2008) book on Richard Nixon, histories of the Republican Party (Black & Black 2002), and work by political scientists on the GOP’s Southern Strategy (Aistrup 1996). [In contrast, a growing number of historians, led by Lassiter (2007), argue that party realignment in the South was a function more of suburbanization than of reaction to a changed racial landscape. See Crespino (2007), Lassiter & Crespino (2009).]

For other scholars of the right, different cultural factors take center stage. Andrew (1997) views conservative student politics in the 1960s, crucial for the transformation of the GOP, as infused by the same cultural energies of youthful optimism and radicalism

that spurred the development of groups on the left such as Students for a Democratic Society. He also sees young conservatives as further energized by the horror they felt about the anti-Vietnam War movement, the New Left generally, and the counterculture. While attending to underlying political-economic conditions, particularly Cold War defense spending and suburbanization, McGirr (2001) similarly highlights cultural factors in her history of postwar conservatism in Orange County, California. She argues that middle-class residents of the county—many evangelical Protestants—“felt compelled to enlist in [political] battle...because of their sense of a widening chasm between the world of the New Deal liberal state,” seen as abetting left social movements and as insufficiently hostile to communism, “and the values they found meaningful” (McGirr 2001, p. 66). Other research on the right, including that by sociologists, echoes these conclusions, arguing that conservative success would have been impossible had large numbers of evangelicals and fundamentalists not been politically mobilized (Brint & Schroedel 2009, Diamond 1998, Klatch 1987, Wilcox 1992). This required the building of a vast social and technological infrastructure, as we discuss below, but another necessary condition was the clash of worldviews discussed by McGirr and precipitated by specific cultural and historical developments such as feminism and changing attitudes toward marriage and the family, the legalization of abortion, the gay rights movement, and the perceived growth of secular culture (for general discussion, see Schulman & Zelizer 2008).

In contrast to culturalist approaches, a third perspective on social change highlights institutional dynamics. To be sure, one of the many lessons of neo-institutional theory is that institutions and formal organizations are in part cultural phenomena, collectively enacted on the basis of widely shared cultural schemata, myths, beliefs, and practices (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Friedland & Alford 1991, Meyer & Rowan 1977). Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between approaches to change, such

as those considered above, that attend to the macro-level effects of particular cultural dispositions, and those that put the logic of institutions front and center. Neo-institutionalism itself, though often faulted for failing to account for innovation, falls under this rubric inasmuch as it offers a theory of change qua the diffusion of practices across organizational fields. Strains of historical institutionalism in sociology and political science that view social change trajectories as conditioned by long-standing institutional patterns belong in the same category (see Thelen 1999). So, too, do political process theories of social movements (McAdam 1982) in which the state is seen as the main target of mobilization and other institutional structures shape movement opportunities and strategy.

Historians of conservatism have not been much concerned with institutional logics *per se*. But institutions feature prominently in many sociology and political science accounts that bear upon the rise of the right. For example, analysis of institutional dynamics was at the heart of early work by sociologists on neoliberal policy reform. Critiquing the rationalist assumption that such reforms could be accounted for in terms of their technical efficiency, and drawing on institutionalist models of diffusion and isomorphism (Haas 1990, Hall 1993), sociologists viewed neoliberal reform as an imitative process in which local policy actors, vulnerable to pressures from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, settled on promarket policies as a strategy for establishing legitimacy (Babb 2001, Campbell & Pedersen 2001, Centeno 1994, Markoff & Montecinos 1993). This perspective highlighted the importance of U.S.-trained economists in the production and dissemination of neoliberal ideas (Babb 2001, Dezalay & Garth 2002, Fourcade 2006, Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb 2002, Kelley 1997, Valdés 1995). Two recent arguments expand on this work. The first, developed from the standpoint of actor-network theory, questions the idea of a simple, one-way diffusion of neoliberal ideas from an American core

to an Eastern European or Latin American periphery (Bockman & Eyal 2002). Instead, it emphasizes a process of cross-national dialogue and exchange carried out within a transnational network that includes, but also extends beyond, economists. The second argument, influenced by Bourdieu, suggests that the package of relations constituting neoliberalism is best understood not simply as an intellectual project or as a set of bureaucratic reforms, but also as a result of shifting alliances and struggles in the political field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1999, Mudge 2008). Viewed in this light, neoliberalism was a counter-hegemonic program forged in a political context marked by welfare-state liberalism in the West and socialism in the East. In the United States, it was conservative activists who took the leading role as advocates.

A common theme in both arguments is the need for a longer historical view of neoliberalism's development and attention to the institutional structures in which the project was nurtured, including the new institutions of knowledge production mentioned above. Again, these have not received as much sociological attention as they should, but among the institutions dedicated to the promotion of neoliberal ideas specifically is the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a free market think tank (founded in 1938, some accounts to the contrary) that has attracted many libertarian economists, including Gottfried Haberler of the Austrian school, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman, and Council on Economic Advisers members Paul W. McCracken and Herbert Stein (Medvetz 2012). AEI also housed writers who sought to popularize neoclassical economic ideas, including Jude Wanniski, who wrote the supply-side economics bible, *The Way the World Works* (1978), while an AEI scholar-in-residence (Blumenthal 1986). The main figure in AEI's growth was William J. Baroody, a former Chamber of Commerce official who served as a speechwriter and campaign adviser for Goldwater (Buckley 2008, Midden-dorf 2006, Smith 1993). Two additional nodes in the libertarian economist network were the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), a

free market educational society formed in 1946 by Leonard Read of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce (Phillips-Fein 2009b), and, as discussed above, the Mont Pelerin Society, a Switzerland-based conference of scholars founded by Hayek in 1947 and dedicated to classical liberalism (Hartwell 1995, Mirowski & Plehwe 2009, Starbuck 2001). All three organizations benefited considerably from what Phillips-Fein (2009a,b) calls the "business conservative movement." FEE's principal donor, for example, was the Kansas City entrepreneur and philanthropist William Volker, who also underwrote the travel of 17 Americans to the first Mont Pelerin Society meeting (Hoplin & Robinson 2008). But Mont Pelerin's "most active business supporter" was Jasper Elliot Crane, a DuPont Company vice president who convinced friends in business to fund the organization (Phillips-Fein 2009b). As the business conservative movement grew during the 1970s, its members established political action committees and lobbying groups (Balz & Brownstein 1996, O'Connor 2008, Saloma 1984), supplied grants to universities (Moreton 2009), and funded think tanks (Krehely et al. 2004, Miller 2006).

Institutional structures such as these appear to have been critical for the takeoff of neoliberalism, but they are not the only institutions that mattered for conservatism. For example, institutions are key to the account offered by Pierson & Skocpol (2007) and the contributors to their volume on the right, *The Transformation of American Politics*. They argue that American conservatism, in its social as well as economic dimensions, could not have succeeded were it not for "goal-driven political actors engaged in learning, adaptation, and organization building" (Pierson & Skocpol 2007, p. 7). The growth of think tanks is a major example of such organization building, but so is the establishment of the powerful conservative legal foundations and networks chronicled by Teles (2007, 2008) or of, say, the many organizations concerned to support the home schooling movement (see Stevens 2001; for a mapping of key organizations and players in the

conservative movement, see Massey 2005, pp. 117–53). At the same time, all the contributors to the Pierson & Skocpol (2007) volume take seriously the idea that contemporary conservatism should be understood as a reaction to the expansion of an activist American state in the 1960s. Not only did such a state affront conservative sensibilities and interests, but it also profoundly structured the logic of the political field in which conservative groups and organizations vied for power.

Institutions and their dynamics figure as well in Diamond's (1995) political process theory-inspired account of the right's growth, in which the capacity of the movement to fold into itself and coordinate the actions of diverse advocacy organizations is seen as one of its greatest strengths. And they are present in research on the emergence of new media forms, such as talk radio and conservative Web sites, that have been vital to more recent waves of mobilization (Davis & Owen 1998). While these examples underscore institutional success on the right, other scholars highlight institutional weaknesses on the left, such as in the Democratic Party in the run-up to the historic 1994 congressional elections (Balz & Brownstein 1996), in the American labor movement (Western 1997), in the capacities of the working class more broadly (Cowie 2009), and in left-leaning grassroots organizations (Fisher 2006, Ghaziani 2011).

Although there are other theoretical approaches to social change for which it is harder to find corresponding work on the American right—such as social cycle theories as developed by Sorokin or unilinear evolutionary models [see Sztompka (1994), though here one could point to work on long-term electoral cycles (Merrill et al. 2008) or “end of history” accounts of neoliberal triumph (Fukuyama 1992), respectively]—there is one more approach we wish to consider. Crosscutting the economic, cultural, and institutional theories just discussed, this approach emphasizes that social change rarely comes about ineluctably, but instead requires energetic and motivated actors who exercise creativity in envisioning

an alternative social world and fashioning the political means to achieve it. Given its most systematic expression in the work of Joas (1996), arguments to this effect can be found in McAdam et al.'s (2001) writing on contentious politics, Jasper's (1997) discussion of “the art of moral protest,” Polletta's (2006) treatment of creative storytelling in movements, and Fligstein's (2001) analysis of “social skill.”

At odds with the work of Bell and his collaborators, and in tension with political-psychological accounts of conservatism that portray it as the hobgoblin of little minds resistant to change, most of the literature considered above on the rise of the right depicts conservative activists and politicians as no less creative, visionary, or savvy than their counterparts on the left—whether this took the form historically of broadening the ideology of conservatism to include a significant moral values component (Peele 1984), “inventing” [in Hobsbawm & Ranger's (1983) sense of the term] and drawing attention to traditions of American family life from which the country was said to be veering (Coontz 1992), continually redefining creationism to keep up with new developments in science (Binder 2002), or developing novel techniques for fundraising (Tønnessen 2009). In the absence of this political creativity, spurred by identifiable cultural and institutional conditions but with its content far from fully determined, the contemporary American conservative movement would never have gotten off the ground.

Scholars have yet to reach consensus on the question of which of the many specific causal factors identified above were crucial to the right's rise and which were more ephemeral. No doubt the answer depends on what facet of the conservative movement is being considered. An important problem for historical sociology in the years to come will be to adjudicate between alternative accounts of the right's success. But, as we have also suggested, sociological theory, too, could profit from involvement with the debate, using it as an opportunity to further the development of general theories of social change. Without predicting

the outcome of such efforts, our reading of the evidence from the conservative case suggests that any adequate theory of change must be prepared to recognize that change results from a combination of general social mechanisms and contingent and irreducible historical circumstance; that unifactorial theories of change inevitably do violence to the historical record; and that, while human agency is implicated in most instances of change, individuals and groups pursuing change vary considerably in their agentic powers, a function not simply of the material and organizational resources at their disposal, but also of their capacity to sense genuine structural openings—and the strength of their will to exploit them.

CONSERVATISM AND THE STUDY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The third and final area of sociology we wish to highlight as standing to profit from greater engagement with conservatism is research on social stratification. Were sociologists more attentive to the history and dynamics of the conservative movement, we contend, they would be better positioned to understand some of the causal mechanisms generative of inequality in the United States and the American stratification order more generally.

On the first of these points, there is much concern in contemporary social science with the specification of mechanisms, and in few subfields is this more pronounced than stratification. For example, a major goal of work in the area today is to understand the mechanisms responsible for rising levels of income inequality in the United States. As McCall & Percheski (2010) note in a recent review, numerous hypotheses have been advanced to account for this increase. Some scholars point to changes in family structure that have reduced household incomes at the bottom of the distribution (McLanahan & Percheski 2008) and others to new developments in assortative mating that have led to a proliferation of dual high-income households (Arum et al. 2008, DiPrete

& Buchmann 2006). Generous executive compensation packages (Andrews et al. 2009) and changes in the tax structure (Piketty & Saez 2007) are flagged in some accounts, while additional work examines the effect of a thinning social safety net (Corcoran et al. 2000), of inequities in global patterns of economic development (Alderson & Doran 2010), or of the drop-off in private sector union density that began in the 1960s, with its consequences for working-class wages (Card 1998).

Many, though not all, of these mechanisms are a function of government policy, and, accordingly, McCall & Percheski (2010, p. 339) report “renewed interest” among stratification scholars “in the idea that market income inequality itself admits of political origins.” Such origins are obvious when lawmakers alter the tax code, change the minimum wage (or refuse to), or attempt to pack the National Labor Relations Board with appointees more favorable to labor or business. But they are no less significant when the politics-inequality nexus is more indirect, as when politicians take stands on issues such as public higher education financing or regional economic integration.

Yet two points should be made about work currently being done at the intersection of social stratification and politics. First, there is relatively little of it. A division of labor remains in effect between sociologists and economists on the one side and political scientists and historians on the other, with the former acknowledging that politics shape the income distribution as well as “mobility regimes” (DiPrete 2002) but, with a few notable exceptions (such as work in the comparative welfare states tradition or on inequality and criminal justice policy), generally leaving it to others to explain policy variation and shifts. Concretely, this takes the form of research articles that cite a few studies on policy trends before launching into complex empirical investigations of operative mechanisms. While no one study can do everything, the effect of such a division of labor is to treat the emergence of mechanisms of inequality—at least those rooted in politics—as exogenous to sociological models, a strange move, particularly

given that theoretical work on mechanisms has been at pains to stress their contextually variable, emergent nature. Because there is reason to believe the rise of the conservative movement is causally related to the emergence of several key inequality-producing mechanisms, greater attention to it should help scholars generate more robust accounts of the “American stratification system” (Massey 2007).

Second, on those rare occasions when stratification scholars have engaged conservatism, they have typically done so from the vantage point of one of the three objectionable approaches we identified at the outset of our article: viewing conservative mobilization that results in inequality-inducing policy changes in terms of (a) backlash, (b) service to the interests of the rich, or (c) the playing out of coherent conservative worldviews. This can lead to reductionistic analyses. For example, in their study of public employment, welfare, and local well-being, Lobao & Hooks (2003) attribute recent trends toward privatization and welfare reform to the spread of the neoliberal view that “government inherently distorts competitive market processes operating among populations; this market interference is at best ineffective, and at worst counterproductive” (p. 523), ignoring the more tangled cultural roots of opposition to the welfare state among many rank-and-file conservatives (Schram 2002). The same problem besets the otherwise exemplary work of Bartels (2008). In the course of trying to explain the paradox of continued Republican success despite evidence that Democratic administrations are better economically for most Americans, Bartels (2008) downplays the role of values and morality in voting and portrays the Republican Party as unswervingly the party of the rich—a party that has been able to fare well because of “partisan biases in economic accountability” (pp. 98–126). Greater concern with the complex and multifaceted history of the right, as documented in the literature reviewed in this article, would yield richer accounts of the political contests, policy decisions, and institutional

circumstances most relevant for explaining current patterns of inequality. Indeed, it is precisely such complexity and historical awareness that mark as outstanding a few select works by sociologists on politics and stratification, such as Martin’s (2008) study of the 1970s tax revolt and the multiple constituencies, interests, and contingencies that underlay it.

But to take seriously our proposition that terms and ideologies like conservative, progressive, and liberal acquire their meanings, not out of thin air, but in the context of specific historical struggles is to rethink another topic in stratification research: the nature of the American stratification order itself. While work on inequality today proceeds from several theoretical angles, most scholars regard as fundamental Weber’s analytical distinction between class, status, and party, often taking as their empirical problem the relationship between factors lying across these dimensions, as in Chan & Goldthorpe’s (2007) work on class, status, and cultural consumption, or research on class, party affiliation, and voting (Evans 1999, Manza et al. 1995). Yet our reading of the evidence from the American political context is that, in the wake of conservatism’s rise, some of the distinction between status and party may be blurring. Weber (1948 [1924], p. 932) defined status groups as those whose members are accorded “specific, positive or negative, social estimation[s] of *honor*” (emphasis in original) and parties as organizations “oriented toward the acquisition of social power” (p. 938). But for many contemporary Americans, it would seem, political ideology and party affiliation do not merely reflect beliefs and organizational commitments aimed at the achievement of power; they also signal varying degrees of membership in one of two increasingly well-recognized social groups—liberals and conservatives—that are accorded (and vie for) differential amounts of social esteem in different contexts and provide people with highly salient social identities. We may thus be witnessing the institutionalization of a social form Weber did not anticipate, and that represents an equally

radical break from the expectations of theories of status politics focused on the concerns of sociodemographic groups: the political or ideological bloc itself as status group.

Sociologists studying the United States have not been much alert to this possibility, but some have come close in their analysis of the so-called culture war. The first sociological proponents of the culture war thesis were Hunter (1991) and Wuthnow (1996), who argued that by the end of the 1970s a conflict had erupted between actors championing one of two conceptions of morality: the progressive and the orthodox. In Hunter and Wuthnow's ideal types, orthodox morality is fixed, absolute, and subservient to a higher authority, whereas progressive morality is subjective, contextual, and individual in nature. According to Hunter and Wuthnow, religious and political coalitions had formed around each of these worldviews, bringing together individuals and organizations who pressed for cultural and social policy reforms on such issues as abortion, the family, multiculturalism, bilingual education, immigration, prayer in schools, gay rights, flag burning, gun control, and political correctness. While notions of culture clash animated important qualitative research in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Klatch 1987, 1999; Luker 1984), work on the culture war soon took a quantitative turn as the issue was reframed as one of public opinion polarization. The seminal piece was by DiMaggio et al. (1996), who found that over a 20-year period there had been no overall increase in polarization except on the single issue of abortion. Yet even on abortion Mouw & Sobel (2001) critiqued the methodology of DiMaggio et al. and claimed that polarization had been overestimated, a finding repeated in other studies (Evans 1999, 2003; Fiorina & Abrams 2008; Hoffmann & Miller 1998).

Although we do not deny the significance of this research, in our view it mistakes the trees for the forest in two interrelated ways. First, geared toward examining the accuracy of popular accounts, it fails to treat the culture war as a phenomenon unfolding primarily in what

Alexander (2006) calls "the civil sphere"—as an event in which narratives, frames, and scripts of conflict were injected into American political discourse with real effect, regardless of their accuracy as descriptions of public opinion (Miller & Hoffmann 1999). Hunter and Wuthnow may have been the first sociologists to articulate the culture war thesis, but as both scholars noted it was actors in the political field, along with journalists, who were the first to formulate its tropes and to name and characterize the ostensibly warring parties. This occurred as the conservative movement, buoyed by its successes during the Reagan era, pressed forward with an agenda of cultural change, which required that moral boundaries be drawn in relation to other groups; as conservatives pursued a deliberate effort to divide the secular and progressive wings of the Democratic coalition from more religious and traditional ones (Jost 2006, Perlstein 2008, Stanley 2011); and as the left haltingly responded to both efforts.

Second, public opinion research on the culture war that focuses entirely on attitudinal shifts ignores what may be the most important consequence of all this cultural work: that Americans (at least those who attend to politics) increasingly see themselves as belonging to distinct cultural-political camps, whether or not opinion has become more polarized. Several empirical studies provide evidence of such a shift. For example, Miller & Hoffman (1999) find that members of more orthodox religious denominations are more likely today to define themselves as conservative, and members of more progressive ones as liberal, despite there having been little change in their substantive attitudes since the 1970s, and that they harbor increasing suspicion of those on the other side of the ideological divide. In a similar vein, party-sorting theory in political science (Fiorina & Abrams 2008, Levendusky 2009) posits that elite polarization of the political parties has led to a sorting of the public whereby those who conceive of themselves as liberal cast their votes more exclusively for Democrats, and

conservatives for Republicans, again without significant attitudinal changes. The numbers here are remarkable: The percentage of Republicans who describe themselves as conservative rose from 43 in 1972 to 66 in 1996 (Green et al. 2002, p. 31), tracking directly the rise of the right.

Again, a possible interpretation of these developments is that liberal and conservative now denote political status groups, akin to other status groups such as those around religion, ethnicity, or lifestyle. Without reference to status groups per se, and focusing more on parties than ideology, a similar thesis is pursued in Green et al.'s (2002) book, *Partisan Hearts and Minds*. Resuscitating a long tradition of research on political socialization (see Sapiro 2004), these authors argue that "partisanship reflects" not "rational evaluations of party platforms and performance in office" (p. 4), but social identities to which people become cognitively and emotionally attached—identities that are enduring over the life course, are linked to stereotypes about political in-groups and out-groups, and affect such outcomes as voting and voter learning. While less work has gone into theorizing liberal and conservative as social identities (but see the classic piece by Conover & Feldman 1981), there is evidence that these categories, as expressions of group membership, matter, too, and increasingly so. For example, using data from the American National Election Studies, Malka & Lelkes (2010, p. 170) report that "conservative-liberal identity, measured prior to the politicization of a particular issue, predicted future stance on that issue independently of substantive measures of conservative-liberal ideology, party identity, and demographics." Bishop & Cushing (2008) find that those who identify as conservative are more likely to relocate to what are seen as conservative areas, and liberals to liberal ones, offering an alternative explanation for dynamic aspects of the red state/blue state phenomenon, for which there is real evidence in terms of voting patterns, even if it is sometimes overstated (Abramowitz & Saunders 2006; cf. Glaeser & Ward 2006).

We know that media markets are increasingly segmented by political ideology, with conservatives tuning in to the Fox network and liberals watching PBS and MSNBC. Social networks may be structured around political identities, too (Ackland & Shorish 2009, Christakis & Fowler 2009), and there is growing evidence that the political valences of numerous occupations reflect self-selection based on perceptions of fit with liberal or conservative self-identity more than objective economic interests (Fosse & Gross 2011, Fosse et al. 2011, Weeden & Grusky 2005). The idea that liberal and conservative may signal membership in what are widely seen as distinct social groups fits well with our overall approach to conservatism, which stresses processes of group formation.

These findings raise a host of questions that sociology has yet to address. If our argument is right, how do liberal and conservative, qua expressions of status group identity, stand in relation to other group identities, and does political status group membership facilitate or impede network building across traditional social cleavages? Under what general conditions do political status groups form, and how are societies organized around them different from those in which categories such as liberal and conservative are not so invested with meaning? How does political status group membership mediate involvement in consequential forms of collective action, such as labor mobilization? What are the processes by which individuals become members of such groups, break away from them, or straddle their boundaries if they feel pulled between multiple groups? And what are the social practices associated with group membership—practices that could easily (and problematically) show up as characterological features in political-psychological studies? These questions flow from a recognition of how the conservative movement, in interplay with the left, has reconfigured the American cultural-political field. They open up new vistas for research and highlight the possibility that the topography of power in the contemporary United States may be different from what is usually recognized.

CONCLUSION

Our goal in this article has been to make a case to sociologists that they ought to devote more attention to the mainstream American conservative movement. While a relatively small number of sociologists already work on the topic, including scholars of social movements, economic sociologists studying neoliberalism and labor relations, and sociologists of religion, we have endeavored to show that a greater focus on the right could be advantageous for three areas of the discipline not as obviously connected to it: the sociology of intellectuals, theoretical work on social change, and research on social stratification. To this end, we have reviewed the substantial history, political science, and journalistic literature on American conservatism that has cropped up over the past 15 years or so, arguing that it can be profitably read through the lens of these three concerns. Beyond that, we have sought to show that the conservative movement figures as an empirical case with respect to major theoretical questions and also as a transformative development in American society and globally. Space constraints dictated that our review be selective, but we hope, in addition, to have given sociologists a sense of the connections between research on the American right and still other themes not covered here.

Why has sociology not been at the forefront of scholarly examination of the American conservative movement? In our view there are several reasons for this, including the oddly ahistorical definitions of conservatism and of

conservative movements with which sociologists have tended to work, which have led to neglect of conservatism's many permutations; a general lack of interest among sociologists in conventional as opposed to contentious politics; a tendency toward theoretical asymmetry whereby conservative movements are regarded as having altogether different properties and characteristics from their counterparts on the left (which in its worst moments yields simplistic depictions of conservatism as a conspiracy of the powerful or a confederacy of dunces); and, we think it is fair to say, a disinclination on the part of sociologists to study individuals and groups toward whom they are not personally sympathetic. We are under no illusion that a single review article will alter these long-standing tendencies, but sociology would have a surer grasp of American society if they were to give way. For sociological research on the American conservative movement to take off, however, still another change is required. To gain the kind of insider access necessary for nuanced explanations of the American right, at least moving forward in time, sociology will also have to win the trust of conservatives by presenting itself as a social science discipline that prizes objectivity and ethical neutrality and that offers something to conservatives in terms of greater self-understanding. To the extent that prominent movements in the discipline push against this Weberian ideal, sociology's ability to achieve insight into a political phenomenon of historic importance is compromised.

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