

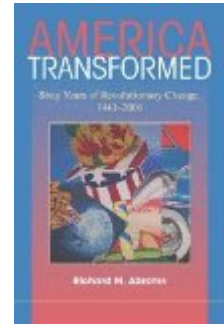
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Abrams. *America Transformed: Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change, 1941-2001*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. vii + 345 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86246-2.

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## Change Driven from the Top

For Richard Abrams, the previous six decades in American history have been a time of paradox. A professor of history at the University of California at Berkeley, Abrams contends that the nation experienced enormous progress in numerous areas. Life was markedly different, and better, for the vast majority of the population compared to earlier times. By the 1970s, however, a “failure syndrome” (p. 219) left a legacy of bitterness, division, and doubt that problems could be improved. Angry, anxious, and opposed to many of the changes of the 1950s and 1960s, conservatives organized a counterrevolution that was able to thwart many reformers’ aspirations. Meanwhile, advocates for change, who worked in the Democratic Party or in other political movements such as various New Left organizations, weakened the drive for reform through their squabbles with one another. Liberalism was thus under assault from left and right. Sympathetic to liberalism, but not blind to its failures, Abrams laments what he sees as a diminished, polarized nation plagued by doubt and unable to confront social and economic challenges. With the rise of Ronald Reagan and the broader conservative movement, Abrams insists, “the people were directing anger not at corporate power but at the reform movements that had sought to contain that power and to substitute a more generous spirit for Americans’ overarching acquisitive quest” (p. 315). These broad themes of liberal advance followed by backlash will be familiar to students of post-World War II history, but this work will be of interest to specialists and relative newcomers alike. Synthesizing a wealth of secondary sources, Abrams has produced an innovative

and thought-provoking look at well-traveled ground.

Unlike most scholars of this period, Abrams organizes his work thematically rather than chronologically. Instead of telling a story that centers on personalities or dramatic events, he first explores eight revolutions that have reshaped American life since 1941. Enormous material progress, Abrams points out, “would be the most conspicuous general feature of American life in the third quarter of the twentieth century” (p. 28). By 1990, he notes, the real income of families in the bottom tenth of the population equaled the median family income of 1950. A rising tide did indeed lift nearly all boats. Government helped produce this prosperity through middle-class programs in housing, road construction, and other areas. Likewise, Abrams defends anti-poverty efforts of the 1960s and 1970s as improving conditions for those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. Since the 1970s, however, income gains have been modest at best for the middle class, while the lower classes have lost ground in real terms. Inequality has widened, and the middle class works more hours and feels squeezed economically. A sense of benevolence toward the poor has given way to contempt.

Second, the nation shifted from a policy of relative isolation in global affairs to becoming a world power. Abrams recognizes the contradictions and failures of foreign policy, but he also credits policymakers of the 1940s and 1950s in dealing with the aftermath of World War II and facing the threat of international communism. He

grows more critical of foreign policy in later decades as his focus shifts to Vietnam and Iraq. The change in foreign policy helped produce a third transformation—the military took on a much more prominent role in American society.

Business developments constitute Abrams's fourth revolution. Technological innovations, a drive for efficiency, heightened international competition, and a merger mania have boosted corporate power. Business, he maintains, is less public spirited. The result has been a corporate world more focused on the short-term and the bottom line, less mindful of the needs and concerns of workers and consumers.

Abrams's four other revolutions lay in the social realm. African Americans have risen to greater heights socially, politically, and economically than ever, and women have more choices about how to define themselves. Men, too, face new questions and possibilities about their roles. Americans live in a society that is more open and looser about sexuality. Finally, he contends that privacy is in retreat, thanks largely to technology, the courts, and a greater willingness of individuals to share aspects of their lives (and to watch others) that in earlier generations would have been too shameful.

This thematic approach serves Abrams well, for it helps solidify his case that dramatic change occurred in each of these areas. Abrams asks readers, in a brief but especially powerful section, to imagine what America was like in the late 1940s and early 1950s. That America would be "virtually an alien country" (p. 6) to those alive in the early twenty-first century. This was a nation where a husband could force his wife to move against her will and appropriate her income, African Americans could not testify against a white person, combination locks were sufficient to prevent bicycle thefts, car alarms did not exist, college tuition was free or almost free, people dressed more formally, and people did not brag about marital affairs or reveal sexual secrets in public (pp. 7-8). These are just a few of the examples Abrams cites. He strikes an appropriate balance in sketching this world—he acknowledges its racism and sexism, and he identifies other faults. He also rightly notes that not all the changes of recent decades have been improvements. There are still serious challenges regarding race and gender issues, he rightly asserts.

The second distinctive feature of this work is how Abrams challenges much recent historiography in locating the sources of these changes. He writes, "Nearly all of the revolutions of our half-century owed largely, in some

cases mainly, not to great groundswells of grassroots activism but rather to the work of relatively small groups of leaders" (p. ix). These elites functioned in government, business, education, and the media, and their decisions carried disproportionate influence.

Abrams offers a spirited, persuasive defense of this thesis in several areas. Elites had substantial influence in foreign affairs, business, domestic public policy, and privacy, and in crafting new technologies that transformed society. Abrams also makes a strong case that elites, especially the courts, drove critical changes in race relations. Had public opinion been allowed to carry the day, segregation and other forms of oppression would have persisted for far longer than they did. The activists in the streets, Abrams acknowledges, played essential roles in driving change, but he couples that with a convincing argument about elites.

The second half of the book focuses on political transformations since the 1960s. During the 1970s, the nation moved in a more conservative direction. Liberalism's successes helped sow the seeds of its own demise, as over time increasing numbers of Americans, many of them members of the liberal coalition themselves, began to view the price of change as too high, a price they no longer wanted to pay. In a climate of economic abundance, the cost of reform seemed relatively small. However, in the more precarious economic climate of the 1970s, business mobilized to fight regulation, most whites resented affirmative action, and increasing numbers of Americans resented taxes. Conservative religious Americans rebelled against what they viewed as a moral decline encouraged, or at least tolerated, by liberal elites. The confidence of the 1950s and early 1960s had been replaced by a "failure syndrome" (p. 219). This was not simply a perception problem, though Abrams rightly notes that misperception and misunderstanding about certain developments led to a more pessimistic view than was warranted, but also from some of the internal problems within liberalism itself.

The result, Abrams insists, was a nation transformed by the 1980s and 1990s. For Abrams, there was a "Reagan Revolution" that dramatically reshaped the nation's economic and foreign policies. The strength of conservatism remained clear in the Clinton administration, which did not and could not, return to the robust liberalism of the 1960s. Clinton effectively beat back conservative challenges to dismantle or cripple many government initiatives, but there were no major new undertakings either.

Abrams has produced a bold, original work that de-

serves a wide readership. It stands as both a rigorous introduction to this period for non-specialists, while specialists will find much to ponder even if they do not always agree with his conclusions.

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