

version of popular sovereignty. This marked, he says, the “last gasp” for the principle (279).

In light of Childers’s extensive use of primary sources—congressional debates, committee reports, newspapers, published and manuscript letters—I would like to have had him chart the language of popular sovereignty over the 77 years he covers. In a sense, popular sovereignty was a principle without a name. Although historians employ the phrase regularly, contemporaries did not use it consistently. In fact, I do not see it in quoted excerpts in Childers’s book. Comparing the frequency of “popular sovereignty” to “noninterference” and the somewhat pejorative “squatter sovereignty” after 1847 would be a measure of the idea’s hold on the antebellum generation. Nevertheless, Childers is a close, insightful reader of his sources and has written a valuable book that provides an essential long-range perspective on the debates over slavery in the territories.

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Daniel T. Rodgers. *Age of Fracture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 360. \$29.95.

Everything is broken. (Bob Dylan, *Oh Mercy*, 1989)

Daniel Rodgers dares to forsake a subtitle in *Age of Fracture*, his survey of the shifting intellectual landscape of the United States during the last 40-odd years. The choice suggests everything that is inspired about his book, which confidently explores the importance of ideas as structuring forces in recent American life. It also points to the problem—or better said the irony—of a synthetic study held together, paradoxically, by a central premise of fragmentation.

Something is broken in Rodgers’s book. It is the robust notion of “society” that he argues dominated mid-twentieth-century thinking and policy in American life. By the 1980s, this term had lost its hold, its sway, its hegemonic grip. “Strong metaphors of society,” Rodgers writes, “were supplanted by weak ones. Imagined collectivities shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out” (3). Accompanying this change, “Conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social cir-

cumstance, institutions, and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed choice, agency, performance, and desire” (3). To Rodgers, a “thinning,” “disaggregation,” and increased “differentiation” took place (3). Centrifugal forces replaced centripetal ones. The social as a crucial aspect of lived experience and social theory alike—a middle ground where people came together in a coherent way, where the individual was enmeshed in a larger entity worth analyzing and honoring in its own right—lost legitimacy. It fractured, as it were, into a new fissured vision: a million instantly autonomous selves somehow flourishing (or suffering, depending on one’s perspective) within the mechanisms of the supposedly “free” market. There was no longer a mediating force of the “social” to hold it all together. As British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher infamously put it at the time, “There is no such thing as society.”

Probing how this enormous ideological change took place in the US context, Rodgers covers presidential speeches, changing economic thought, the last decades of the Cold War, the conflicts of the “culture wars,” new ideas in jurisprudence, transformed religious values, engagements with categories of identity such as race and gender, and fierce debates among American intellectuals and policy makers about civil society, public life, and history itself. He begins with a chapter on Ronald Reagan, demonstrating how the president and his speechwriters came to use the word “freedom” as a general, fuzzy, all-purpose sense of psychic revitalization, hope, and optimism. With this vague portrayal of “freedom” came a new vision of “the people”: no longer a collective force, the people were but a kind of cartoonish assemblage of abstracted persons, stereotypes collaged together without ever quite adding up to something larger than the sum of its parts.

Undergirding this turn in political rhetoric by Reagan and his speechwriters were new ideas of the economic that, after the seeming failure of Keynesian approaches to “stagflation” in the 1970s, garnered enormous intellectual appeal. These new theories profoundly shifted from macroeconomic questions of managing the “aggregate” to microeconomic issues of individual actors. Crucially, however, for Rodgers, unlike for contemporary cultural Marxist theorists of the postmodern ranging from David Harvey to Frederic Jameson, it is not that material factors directly controlled ideology; rather, it is that new intellectual conceptualizations of the market reshaped many other visions of the social. Not the market as a structural force, but the idea of the market as a structural force contributed to the fracturing of the social.

In what Rodgers calls a “contagion of metaphors,” the conceptual “thinning” out of the middle ground between individuals and market carried over into other spheres of intellectual, political, and cultural life (10). Rodgers shifts to intellectual and policy debates about power in chapter 3, race in

chapter 4, and gender in chapter 5, noting in each case how efforts to make sense of identity tended to dilute collective visions of “society” into increasingly small, disparate, microscopic elements. In chapter 6, he explores how the vigorous debates about civil society between libertarians and communitarians similarly broke down small groups of people into “little platoons of society” with no larger, workable, and shared sense of virtue, nation, or collectivity. In chapter 7, he shifts to conceptualizations of time, examining the emphasis on historical compression, simultaneity, and yet another fragmentation of the assumed social order in what Francis Fukuyama infamously called, in 1989, the “end of history.” In all these cases, Rodgers convincingly shows how “society” dissolved as a term with staying power, smashed to bits by numerous intellectual pressures on its validity, legitimacy, and authority. In a brief epilogue about the aftermath of 9/11, Rodgers notices the effort to recover older, thicker visions of society as a collective whole, only to find that these ideals had been permanently reconfigured by the new ethos of the atomized individual.

Overall, this is no play-it-safe textbook or assemblage of facts and figures lacking an argument. Rodgers makes bold interpretive moves, pursuing his central theme of “fracture” with bulldog determination as he traverses a wide range of disparate subjects. Even when investigating difficult works from specialized corners of economics, the law, sociology, or poststructuralist literary theory, he never forsakes clarity of expression in his prose. As an intellectual historian, Rodgers believes that ideas—“acts of mind” as he calls them—matter (10). He repeatedly shows that arguments over what is, can, and should be thought fundamentally intersect with material and economic forces and with political struggles over governance, the law, norms, equality, justice, and freedom.

At the same time, *Age of Fracture*, as its lack of a subtitle suggests, asks readers to accept the term “fracture” as a paradoxically unifying metaphor for recent times in the United States. The missing colon reveals the strangeness of the book. Rodgers endeavors to write a synthetic study whose central thesis is one of fragmentation. At the center of his narrative is the idea that, since the 1970s, the center could not hold. To provide the whole story of American intellectual trends over the last 40 years is, for Rodgers, precisely to demarcate their lack of wholeness. He finds stability in noting irony. He lumps together stories to show how America was splitting apart. His thick descriptions emphasize the “thinning” out of agreed-on social meanings. Rodgers looks for solid meaning in his materials by noting their “fluidity.” His gathering together of various sectors of American thought is meant to illuminate their “disaggregation.” The similarity found among the ideas he explores has to do with the continual pressures of “differentiation.” The coherence of his

book arises from identifying the eruption of incoherence everywhere. The only certainty is the rise of a profound uncertainty. Rodgers sums up what he views as a fundamental breaking down. One eventually starts to wonder: Does the messy, confusing history of any recent past appear fractured from close view? Does Rodgers's metaphor, its jagged edges traced so finely and effectively, really hold water in the end?

For Rodgers, in a telling moment, the term fracture itself is not enough to capture how the fabric of American life was rent during the *Age of Fracture*. In his chapter on "Gender and Certainty," he concludes, "It had not felt like fracture. It had felt like war" (179). What lurks in Rodgers's book about "the multiple fronts of ideational battle" is a kind of wistfulness for the thicker vision of the collective that reigned in the immediate decades after World War II (3). That era, as Rodgers himself admits, was no utopia: it used to be called the "age of conformity" or, in certain more optimistic views, the "age of consensus"; its pressures on individual autonomy, freedom, equality, and justice were immense, particularly for those who were deemed outside the norms of civic or social belonging. But its allure remains for this author, who tries to patch together the cracks and piece together the parts of recent US life by describing their very brokenness, who, one suspects, dreams of building a new society within the Humpty Dumpty shell of the old.

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