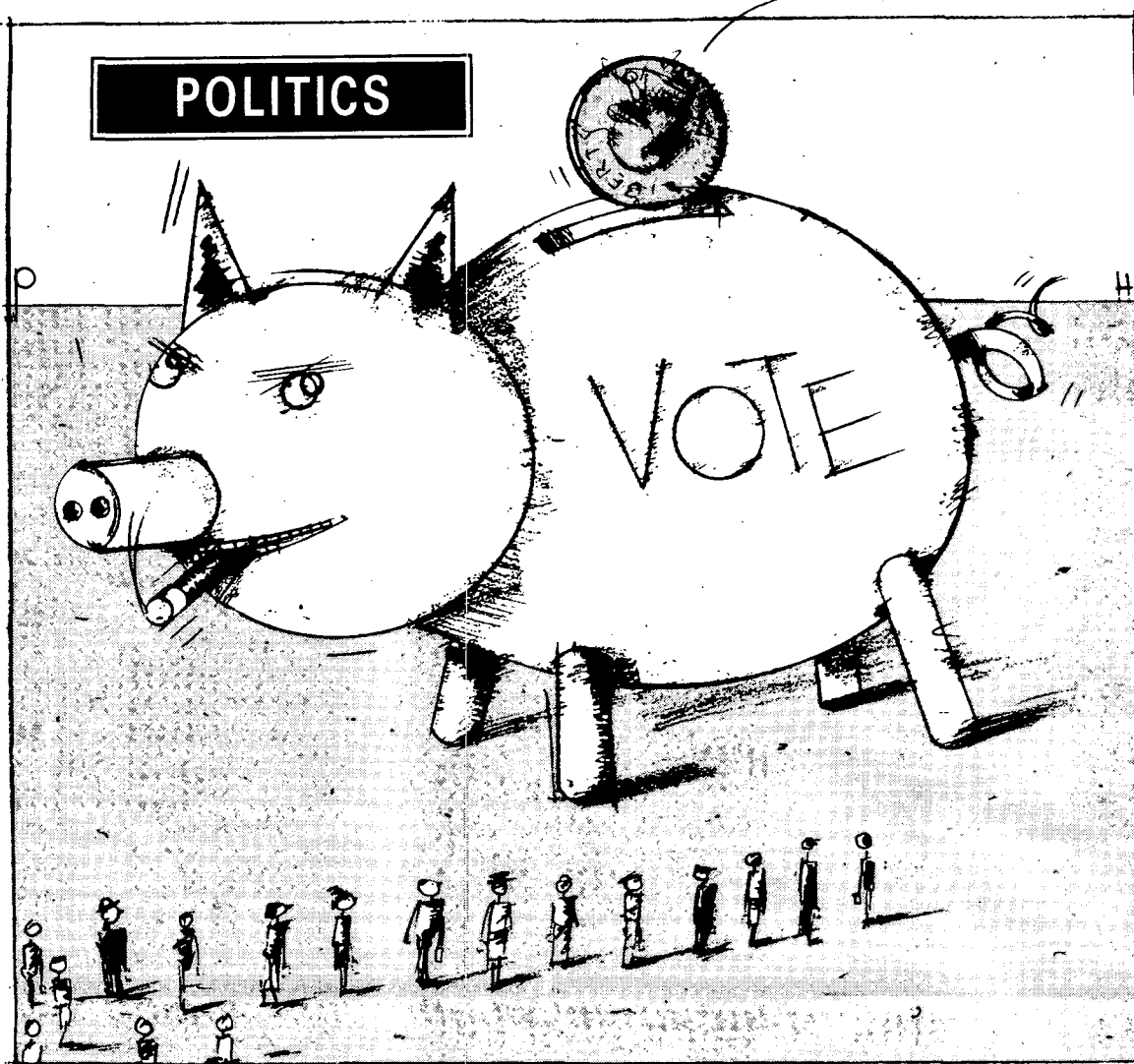


## On leaning left and turning right



### Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics

By Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers  
Hill and Wang, 276 pp., \$19.95

#### By Jim Naureckas

IRONICALLY, THOMAS FERGUSON AND Joel Rogers begin their book, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics*, by arguing that there's been no right turn—at least not among the general public. The authors advance the thesis, which may be familiar to some readers, that the much-heralded new conservative mood in America is largely a figment of the media's imagination.

They back up this contention with polls that show steady or rising support for social spending, environmental regulation, affirmative action (45 percent recognized its necessity in 1978, 71 percent in 1985) and other liberal goals, even through the nadir of the Reagan years. The depth of anti-corporate sentiment in this country should make any radical proud to be an American—in 1979, 79 out of 100 people agreed that "there is too much power concentrated in the hands of a few large companies for the good of the nation," up from 61 percent in 1969.

Aside from limited areas—the authors cite resistance to tax increases, support of tougher criminal sentences and, for a while, a desire for more military spending—the electorate has not shown anything that could be described as a shift to the right in the past two decades. Indeed, if public policies followed public opinion, the '80s would be remembered as a time of increasing liberalization in many areas.

**The right stuff:** Yet it is undeniable that there has been a right turn of some sort in U.S. politics. The most right-wing president since Coolidge has won two electoral landslides; the Republicans had control of the Senate for six years; and the center of political debate—among political and journalistic elites, not in the public—has shifted markedly.

Conventional political scientists, who assume that public policy reflects public opinion as expressed through elections, are at a loss to explain this phenomenon. But Ferguson and Rogers argue that American public policy is not determined democratically, but rather is controlled by members of major business and establishment groups, whom Ferguson and Rogers refer to as "investors."

These people—whom the authors divide into different business factions—"invest" in various par-

ties and candidates, choosing those whose policies best match the investors' perceived interests. Since they control campaign funding, most political organizations and most media outlets, their investment is what determines political success or failure in America.

This ought not to be news to most readers—and, probably, it's the common-sense view of most Americans, including the 63 percent who chose not to vote in the last election. What makes *Right Turn* such an important book is its documentation and its detail—Ferguson and Rogers give us an annotated blueprint of the real political structure that runs our nation.

(A caveat: the wealth of data in the book regarding who supports whom is not as "scientific" as it may first appear. As the authors note in an appendix, "We do not believe that the legally restricted contributions reported by the FEC yield very much useful information on the actual quantity of resources expended." Members of the Forbes 400 and other prominent individuals are tracked to see whom they have supported, even though the amount of their declared contributions may not be significant. That these people have a major impact on campaigns and elections is thus both a premise and a major conclusion of the book.)

The real right turn, for Ferguson

and Rogers, is a result of the breakdown of what they call "the New Deal coalition," described as "a new power bloc of capital-intensive industries, investment banks and internationally oriented commercial banks"—with labor as a sort of junior partner.

**Cracks in the system:** These business groups—including such up-and-comers as IBM, General Electric and many of the largest oil companies—stood to benefit from international trade, and so were opposed to tariffs and in favor of an internationalist foreign policy. Being capital-intensive, they could afford to create a political base with liberal social programs and labor laws—at least until the late '60s.

The cracks in this system, according to the authors, resulted from the increasing competitiveness of the world economy. In 1950, the U.S. controlled a fifth of all trade; by 1980, that had fallen to one-tenth. At the same time, U.S. dependence on the world market grew—as late as 1970, imports and exports made up only 8.3 percent of the U.S. gross national product; in 1980 they were 17.4 percent.

In short, the U.S. became more involved in the world market at the same time that it ceased to dominate that market. This new economic environment, Ferguson and Rogers say, was the basis for the new political climate of the '70s and '80s—what Thomas Byrne Edsall called "the new politics of inequality." Traditional corporate sponsors deserted the Democrats in favor of the Republicans, feeling that liberalism was now a threat to the profits they had become accustomed to—forming what might be called the right turn coalition.

**The real right turn is a result of the breakdown of "the New Deal coalition" characterized as a new bloc of capital-intensive industries and big banks—with labor as a junior partner.**

It's no news that the Reagan administration supports and is supported by big business. But *Right Turn* also documents—mainly through an in-depth look at the 1984 campaign—how the Democrats play the same side of the street.

**Cash flow flowchart:** Ferguson and Rogers show who came up with the money for all the major primary campaigns—Mondale's (investment banking, real estate, a few multina-

tionals), Glenn's (industry, largely military), Hart's (high-tech, some oil and enormous loans from an Arab-owned bank), Jackson's (mostly grassroots) and McGovern's (nobody).

The book explains why Mondale's campaign was so disappointing—he moved to the right on foreign policy to pick up contributions from Glenn's supporters after Glenn left the race, and then ran a campaign based on "fiscal responsibility" (i.e., raising taxes), because that's what his advisers from the world of high finance were looking for. Having the support of only a fraction of the business community, but running his campaign to please that fraction anyway, Mondale suffered one of the largest defeats in electoral history.

The authors don't see much hope for a politics not based on corporate interests. In their view, the resources commanded by the current establishment are overwhelming: "The only way to relieve deficiencies of time and money is through time and money."

Well, not exactly. *Right Turn* needs more discussion of how corporate support translates into votes. Voters make their choices based on information from advertising and the media, which can be bought, but also on their objective interests, which cannot.

*Right Turn* makes clear that the main factor behind Reagan's reelection was the (artificially) booming 1984 economy. Most people thought they would be better off if Reagan were re-elected—and people who felt this way voted overwhelmingly for Reagan, even if they disagreed with him on almost all other issues.

The hope of the New Deal coalition was to reconcile corporate interests with the interests of the majority of Americans. The right turn was an admission that you can't. But people aren't going to keep voting for policies that ignore their own interests. Unless Reaganomics actually has brought prolonged, stable growth to this country, and the right turn coalition can continue to put off the divisive issues of the trade imbalance and the deficit, the right turn will prove to be a dead end. (The extended uproar over the Iran/contra affair may indicate that this point has already arrived.)

Whatever is the case, *Right Turn* is an essential book about the practical workings of American politics. Reading it, one can't help but agree with Lincoln Steffens, quoted at the beginning of Ferguson and Rogers' other book, *The Hidden Election*: "Politics is business, that's what's the matter with it. That's what's the matter with everything."

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### Prisoners of the American Dream

By Mike Davis  
Verso/Schocken, 320 pp., \$24.95,  
\$10.95 paper

### Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson

By Manning Marable  
Verso/Schocken, 366 pp., \$8.95

By Bill Farrell

# Dreaming of new deals and brighter rainbows



Marable presents a first-rate analysis of contemporary black politics.

ENOUGH TIME HAS PASSED SINCE Reagan's re-election for serious works to appear exploring how American politics have come to such a point. Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers' *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* studies the role of money and elite support in setting the limits of political dialogue in America (see accompanying story). Sidney Blumenthal's *The Rise of the Counterestablishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* documents the construction of the political cadre of the American Right (see *In These Times*, Nov. 5, 1986). Mike Davis and Manning Marable both have written important additions to this growing library.

In an era in which Marxist historiography seems largely concerned with culture, Davis examines the relationship of capitalism and politics. The uniqueness of his project is demonstrated by some of the misplaced criticism it has been subjected to. David Montgomery, writing in *The Nation*, criticized Davis for not writing labor history from the bottom up; but Davis is concerned with both history and political economy, reintroducing politics into history. Montgomery has so internalized the "new" social history—which amounts to a depoliticized analysis—that he seems unable to understand what Davis is doing.

Perhaps two (or, depending how one chooses to read them, three) of the essays on the American working class underemphasize how the working class shaped history, but Davis' framework remains open to such analysis. In any case, the return to political economy is well worth it.

The first part of *Prisoners of the American Dream* examines American labor and working-class history, while focusing upon the question of why labor in the U.S. has been so unsuccessful in pursuing its interests. This question comes terribly close to that old canard: why is there no socialism in the U.S.? It is a bad question with an obvious answer: why should there be? Socialist teleology, like its liberal cousin, is the cause of much bad history.

At times Davis seems to accept the question and its companion, the myth of American exceptionalism. Whatever validity that concept may once have had, it makes no sense to speak of American exceptionalism during an era of global capitalism and economic interdependence in which the U.S.

is the leading figure. Indeed, Davis' analysis of global capitalism undercuts much of the case for American exceptionalism.

**Ford has a consuming idea:** Fortunately, Davis breaks out of his self-imposed straitjacket in an examination of the incorporation of organized labor into the Democratic Party. This marriage was cemented by the post-World War II economic expansion, an expansion led by mass consumption, dependent upon mass markets and relatively high wages. The Fordist regimen of capital accumulation benefitted more than capitalists. As Davis writes, "In this fashion, perhaps a quarter of the American population—especially white-ethnic, semi-skilled workers and their families—were raised to previously middle-class or skilled-worker thresholds of home ownership and credit purchase during the 1950s." Under American aegis, Fordism was planted in Western Europe and Japan.

But the benefits of Fordism did not extend to all. Most American blacks, all agricultural workers and others—between one-quarter to one-third of the population—were excluded from the high-wage economy, keeping them in poverty while curtailing the growth and maintenance of high-wage consumption. The government-subsidized growth of the Sunbelt slowed, though the anti-union atmosphere kept the wages and consumption of much of its population

low even at its economic growth peak. Many industries responded to economic difficulties by moving plants to Third World dictatorships with low wages, while others cut domestic wages.

Plans to make many Third World nations into autonomous industrial societies came to nothing. The most disastrous failures were in Latin America, where reformist illusions fostered by the Kennedy Alliance for Progress were crushed. Hope for high-wage expansion was replaced by low-wage repression, sponsored by the U.S., as well as American-supported coups like that in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

These were among the contradictions that undermined Fordism by constricting the maintenance of high consumption. With Fordism went both the social contract established by the New Deal and the New Deal coalition.

The search for new consumer markets prompted expansion in the wealthier Third World countries, which failed due to extraordinary Third World debt levels and default anxiety. The source of steady high consumption was the new financial, professional and technical elite—the yuppies—whose consumption fueled "overconsumptionism," a pattern that Davis believes cannot sustain growth.

**Where the elite compete:** Davis envisions a bleak future in which the new elite mobilize politically to protect their slice of a shrinking

pie. The 1984 election and the Democrats' abandonment of labor and the poor, especially blacks, may have been a preview.

In Davis' view, any progressive coalition in the foreseeable future must be rooted in Third World communities in the U.S., particularly now that the European immigrants who provided the mass base for progressive movements in much of the 20th century have been assimilated or died of old age. Yet struggles over South Africa and Latin America may provide the political consciousness necessary to engage in political struggles within the U.S.

Davis is caustic in describing the abandonment of Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition by organized labor, feminists and the left press. The Jackson campaign was the first serious coherent social-democratic effort in recent American history, with the most pro-labor and pro-

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feminist platform. Yet when the trumpet sounded, the call went unheeded as "progressive" forces rushed to embrace a Cold Warrior advocating a military quarantine of Nicaragua and Hooverian fiscal conservatism.

*Prisoners of the American Dream*, however, fails to confront the implications of Jackson's defeat for Davis' own analysis. The prospects of a successful minority-led "progressive" movement in the U.S. are bleak. Though Davis' focus upon "Third World" communities in America provides an answer to the question of political consciousness, it fails to explain how the left can win. The majority of poor in America, and certainly of have-nots, are white. They would have to be included in any successful progressive coalition.

Though Davis speaks of the need to establish links between minorities and organized labor, he never

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explains how to accomplish this. And even if every white leftist had supported Jackson, he still would have lost. Absent new strategy, about which Davis is silent, it is still unclear why the Rainbow Coalition should do significantly better in the future than it did in 1984. Though Jackson's achievements

were substantial, to imply that the Rainbow Coalition could provide the basis for a political transformation of the U.S. is unrealistic.

**Manning, the trenches:** Despite its limitations, Davis has written a rigorous work of political economy—though more attention might have been paid to the explosion of the financial market. If Davis is correct about the Rainbow Coalition's centrality to any future "progressive" movement, then Manning Marable, by providing the best analysis yet of the Jackson presidential campaign, has provided an essential new book, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson*.

Marable presents a first-rate analysis of contemporary black politics. His examination of the civil rights movements, particularly of the internal politics revolving around various Washington marches, never fails to enlighten, though his major contribution is his discussion of the construction of the Rainbow Coalition, from its origins in Harold Washington's 1983 mayoral victory in Chicago to the 1984 Democratic national convention.

Along the way, insights abound. For example, Marable reveals that prior to his nomination, Mondale aides wrote a 250-page study concluding that "the only way Mondale can win is by pitching his appeal to the white working class and minorities, not the middle class." Mondale could not, for a variety of reasons, follow this advice. (In his book, Davis recounts the now famous meeting of Mondale and 70 of his principal financial backers. Told to stop knocking the rich, who were financing his campaign, Mondale replied, "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be rich. I want to be rich.") As Marable puts it, Mondale offered not a choice but a whimper.

Beyond his analysis of the election, Marable presents an arresting portrait of how a democratic movement transforms those involved. Marable is suspicious of Jackson, whose career he sees as frequently marked by opportunism, among other failings. Yet by the end of the campaign, Marable contends, leadership of a democratic movement had transformed Jackson into a genuinely great, if flawed, man.

Marable's comparative historical analysis of black resistance throughout the Caribbean, South Africa and America is far less certain, as is his claim that the black petit-bourgeoisie betrayed the mass of blacks during Reconstruction. (Black society emerged from slavery with underdeveloped class structure—in fact, virtually no class structure.) Marable, despite some failings, has written an excellent addition to the literature of contemporary American politics. ■

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