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The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era

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Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s. By Betty Luther Hillman. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. xxvi, 252 pp. \$40.00.)

Often regarded as frivolous and superficial, fashion under certain circumstances performs an important social role by providing symbols that represent social tensions and conflicts. Betty Luther Hillman argues that fashion and style create a nonverbal discourse based on individual choices. During the 1960s, a period of rapid social change in American society, dress and hairstyles embodied these changes, and television disseminated them to the entire population. Social activists used personal appearance as a way of expressing “their disagreement with and alienation from American culture” (p. xviii). Other Americans interpreted this behavior as “signs of the demise of the gender, sexual, racial and middle-class traditions of ‘respectability’ they held dear” (p. xx).

Based on documentary sources such as newspapers, magazine articles and advertisements, periodicals, papers of social movement organizations, court cases, photographs, and memoirs, the book shows how shifting styles of self-presentation played an important role in politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Hillman focuses her analysis on several social groups whose members changed their dress and hairstyles in the 1960s. Young, white, middle-class American men developed hair and clothing styles that led to generational conflicts. Black power activists adopted hair styles and African-heritage clothing which, in turn, influenced New Left and hippie countercultural activists protesting the Vietnam War. These movements produced a conservative backlash. Feminist and gay liberation movements used dress and hairstyles to challenge male and female gender distinctions. Hillman explores the social significance of unisex styles in the 1970s and changing media reactions to them.

Acceptance of new styles was more gradual in the workplace and led to court cases, described in detail by Hillman, challenging workplace restrictions on dress and grooming styles. Differences in opinion among judges reflected continuing debates over new modes

of self-presentation. Hillman argues that conflicts over dress and hairstyles in the 1960s and 1970s symbolized political conflicts and reflected the polarization of views on the necessity of “clear distinctions and rules governing gender, sexuality, respectability and social order” (p. xxiv). In the 1970s, representations of these styles in the media and popular culture diluted their political meanings and led to their widespread acceptance.

Controversies over self-presentation have continued since the 1960s. Hillman says that “certain boundaries of gendered dress still cannot be crossed without dramatic social conflict” (p. 188). Female political candidates’ clothing, for example, is still scrutinized for its conformity to or rejection of gender norms.

Dressing for the Culture Wars extends our understanding of the social impact of fashion by providing an extensive analysis of its role in recent political and social debates.

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The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: U.S. Protest and Central American Revolution. By Nick Witham. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015. x, 240 pp. \$99.00.)

Nick Witham makes an important contribution to our understanding of American political culture in the 1980s. He examines a group of intellectuals, journalists, and filmmakers who, deeply critical of Ronald Reagan’s policies in Central America, sought to inform and mobilize a complacent public. Witham’s main argument is that these cultural producers not only reflected a politics of opposition but also helped shape “the political processes” of that opposition (p. 4).

Witham joins a growing number of scholars in challenging prevailing interpretations of the 1980s as defined disproportionately by Reagan. Americans experienced the so-called age of Reagan primarily as an age of crisis at home (homelessness, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, farm foreclosures, Superfund legislation, and factory shutdowns) and

on the foreign policy front, regarding not only the Soviet Union and the Middle East but also, as Witham shows so effectively, Central America.

Witham makes a solid if uneven case for the importance of this 1980s cultural front. He is not always successful in fulfilling his promise to demonstrate “the vital importance of a ‘cultural left’ to any movement for political and social change” because he too infrequently shows the impact of these cultural producers on the movements (p. 6). Even so, Witham does well in reminding us of a vibrant and important culture of opposition.

Witham divides the book into three sections of two chapters each covering intellectuals, journalists, and filmmakers. Three of the first four chapters examine print culture case studies of the *Nation* magazine, the less well-known *New York Guardian*, and two publishing initiatives undertaken by Verso Books. He also gives a chapter to the historians Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko—both “anti-anticommunists,” if not exactly of the same stripe (p. 32). Witham provides nuanced distinctions between anti-interventionists (such as LaFeber) and anti-imperialists (such as Kolko) and shows how they represented subsets of the Central American solidarity movement.

The book’s most interesting section is the last one, focusing on feature films made by maverick directors at the margins of Hollywood and by feminist documentarians. Without more evidence of how Roger Spottiswoode’s *Under Fire* (1983), Haskell Wexler’s *Latino* (1985), and Oliver Stone’s *Salvador* (1986), were received, Witham struggles to overcome Frederic Jameson’s contention that audiences are, in viewing such films, less likely to see systematic wrongdoing than they are to engage with the fictional stories of the central characters (p. 136).

But in analyzing Pamela Yates and Tom Siegel’s film *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983) and Pamela Cohen and Monona Wali’s *Maria’s Story* (1990), which profile female guerrilla leaders in Guatemala and El Salvador, respectively, Witham convincingly shows how the directors, who were openly political in their aims, fused “the politics of feminism and anti-interventionism.”

The problem with thinking in terms of “the age of Reagan” is that we can too easily lose sight of a resistance tradition that was very much alive in the 1980s. Witham makes an important contribution in helping recover it.

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Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment. By Michael Javen Fortner. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. xiv, 350 pp. \$29.95.)

Scholars including Heather Thompson, Khalil Muhammad, and Michelle Alexander have produced thought-provoking studies that critically explore the complex historical and political roots of the American carceral state and the collateral damage associated with imprisonment. Most notably, in 2010 the legal scholar Alexander published *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in The Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander maintains that legislative victories of the modern-day civil rights movement were undermined by Richard M. Nixon’s 1970s war on drugs, which targeted nonviolent and drug offenders, and that mass incarceration of African Americans was a result of post-World War II federal and state drug laws. Consequently, the nation witnessed the growth of the American prison population and the lifetime marginalization and socioeconomic and political disfranchisement of felons.

Michael Javen Fortner’s *Black Silent Majority* contributes to ongoing conversations on mass incarceration. He boldly challenges Alexander’s view that mass incarceration resulted from conservative federal policies aimed at rolling back 1960s civil rights legislation. “Mass incarceration had less to do with white resistance to racial equality and more to do with the black silent majority’s confrontation with the ‘reign of criminal terror’ in their neighborhoods” (p. 23). Victims of neighborhood crime, black New Yorkers shifted from believing in the 1960s rehabilitation-focused liberal policies as the answer to drug-related crimes and addiction. “Daily indignities ignited a