

AGE OF FRACTURE
(DANIEL T. RODGERS)

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When I first started reading this book, which I pulled more or less at random off my shelf, I was a little mystified why I had bought it. I thought, from its title, it would be political philosophy, but instead it was intellectual history, of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The book seemed crisp and dispassionate at first, though it quickly revealed itself as somewhat meandering and biased. After a little research, I realized that in 2012 *Age of Fracture* had won the Bancroft Prize, awarded to books of American history. Most people probably haven't heard of the Bancroft Prize, but it is regarded as very prestigious, so I must have bought this book because it was publicized in that context. But when I finished reading it, the more I thought about it, the more I disliked this book.

Of course, nowadays (it was founded in 1948, so this has not always been true) the Bancroft Prize is only awarded to left-wing books. Recent recipients include the stupid *Empire of Cotton* and various other books about wrongs done by America, along with a few that seem neutral, such as one on *Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail*. (Maybe I'll get that one. On second thought, maybe not—it is apparently a shrill screed about how America wronged the oceans. Damn Americans.) To the extent the Bancroft Prize enters the larger public consciousness, it is mostly or exclusively because the prize was, a single time, rescinded. That was after being awarded in 2001 to Michael Bellesiles's *Arming America*. His book was received with great fanfare and huge publicity across all media outlets, including getting cover articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* (back when those mattered), because it purported to prove that contrary to the common understanding, but fully comporting with progressive political goals, guns were rare in America until the modern era. Unfortunately for the gun grabbers, Bellesiles fabricated the entirety of his data, in so gross a manner that he was actually fired by Emory University. He's now a bartender, so I suppose there is some justice in the world. Meanwhile, the Bancroft Prize has apparently trudged on, offering books like *Age of Fracture*.

This book is left-wing, too, though in a more muted way. In essence, it is a foreshortened history of ideas in a very specific time and place,

with the underlying thesis that, uniquely in American history, this period (roughly 1975 to 2000) represents a deep fracture of American society. By “fracture,” the author, Daniel Rodgers, does not mean social fracture or atomization. In fact, he sneeringly and without argument rejects Robert Putnam’s widely accepted analysis in *Bowling Alone* of social atomization, since confirmed both by further experience and by many other authors across the political spectrum, from Yuval Levin to Cass Sunstein. Rather, Rodgers means the fracture of ideas, not society, into smaller splinters. He thinks American society is doing fine, except for the continued existence of some meanie conservatives. Because he is blinded by the typical left-wing lust for anything that smacks of so-called emancipation, Rodgers is unable to criticize any fragmentation of society if it appears to be emancipatory, whatever its actual effects on society and its members. Thus, throughout the book, he maintains that American associational life has not fractured. Bowling leagues, labor unions, and churches are not necessary or even, really, desirable, since they can be exclusionary, not emancipatory. “In an age of Oprah, MTV, and charismatic religious preaching, the agencies of socialization were different before, but they were not discernably weaker.” That’s the sum of his argument on the matter, and yes, it’s just that stupid. Nor does he so much as mention the internet, Facebook, and so on, which in 2011 were already highly relevant to social atomization. For Rodgers, everything is just awesome, but we have more ideas than we used to. Which is true enough, but it does not answer the key question—are those new ideas dumb?

The answer is “yes.” At the beginning, Rodgers sets out a summary of his thesis, and I cannot do better. “Across the multiple fronts of ideational battle . . . conceptions of human nature that in the post-World War II era had been thick with context, social circumstance, institutions and history gave way to conceptions of human nature that stressed agency, performance, and desire. Strong metaphors of society were supplanted by weaker ones. Imagined collectivities shrank; notions of structure and power thinned out. Viewed by its acts of mind, the last quarter of the century was an era of disaggregation, a great age of fracture.” I should note, though, that one word particularly matters in that summary—“imagined.” Rodgers just loves the word. He applies it constantly, to anything that he disagrees with, as way to discredit without the messy

need to actually discuss it or disprove. Thus, American society did not have collectivities, it had “imagined collectivities,” which were, you will not be surprised to learn, merely fronts for repression that was relieved by progressive-led emancipation during the Age of Fracture. Similarly, most of us think “fracture” is generally negative; for Rodgers, it is a mostly virtuous “disaggregation” that leads to emancipation. Which is doubtless why this book, modestly interesting but pedestrian, won the Bancroft Prize.

The book is best at the beginning. Rodgers starts with a fascinating study of Presidential speeches. He notes that Jimmy Carter gave as many speeches in office, about a thousand, as all Presidents did collectively in the entire nineteenth century. He analyzes pre-1980 Presidential speeches, noting that they heavily focused on “responsibility, destiny, justice, morality, and society.” This was especially true when the topic was the Cold War (think John Kennedy), but also true across all areas of Presidential attention. We were not promised, and we did not promise ourselves, a free lunch. Rather, we jointly agreed that if we worked together, America could remain great. But Ronald Reagan led, or perhaps just personified, a new focus. He channeled a disembodied freedom, not one tied to the community and ordered liberty, the ancient freedom to seek virtue, but one of radical Enlightenment thinkers such as Tom Paine, shorn of the complexity of those thinkers and the challenges they faced, and turned into gauzy aspirations for modern freedoms untied to community and sacrifice. “It was privatized and personalized, bent in on itself in the very enunciation of its limitlessness.” It worked for Reagan, but Rodgers is entirely correct that this was a big change in national ideation. Today’s conservatives who idolize Reagan may not like it, but Reagan himself led, or at least embodied, the modern American rush to liberty without constraint. (Rodgers also notes that Theodore Roosevelt called Paine “a filthy little atheist,” and today’s American conservatives, as some of them increasingly turn against the Enlightenment project of unbridled liberty and the consequent Leviathan state, should probably join Roosevelt’s opinion.)

Thus, the first of Rodger’s fractures is the severe weakening of a political ideal of true collective action—that is, not collectivism understood as government activity, but of true collectivism, individuals choosing to work together for common goals in the American project. In the

next chapter, Rodgers extends his fracture analysis to economics. He reviews Keynesianism, monetarism, the Phillips Curve, Ronald Coase, Say's Law, public utility regulation, Richard Posner (since fallen from grace and become a doddering eccentric) and much else, with his usual focus on ideas and their splintering. He focuses on ideas because for Rodgers, it is ideas that drive society. This conclusion naturally gives primacy of place to generators of ideas, namely intellectuals such as Daniel Rodgers. There's a little bit too much self-love in this prism for my taste, but Rodgers does a decent job of explicating complicated concepts in this section. His main point is that the theory of economics returned to a focus on the impersonal, unleashed market as being the best mechanism to accomplish all goals, with removal of intrusion by the government or others perceived as necessary to maximize social and individual utility. And thus, "To imagine the market now was to imagine a socially detached array of economic actors, free to choose and optimize, unconstrained by power or inequalities, governed not by their common deliberative action but only by the impersonal laws of the market." Thus, the exaltation of markets increased fracture of ideas, and helped to dissolve the glue of American society—something we see today, with inequality, class divisions, and the rise of Donald Trump, although as I say Rodgers refuses to see any of this with respect to social atomization and the destruction of intermediary institutions.

Rodgers then delves more deeply into ideas not tied directly to specific political issues or economics, starting with new ideas of power. He notes that prior to the 1960s "interest group power" was regarded as the American political norm, with the American system being designed to allow checks and balances to permit interest groups to interact to create political ends. But in the 1960s, we got Marxism infecting everything. Well, that's not exactly what Rodgers says—he focuses on theories about the "new classes," which he ties to Marxist analyses, but not traditional Marxist class analyses. Rather, both left and right began viewing America through new ideas of class. On the left, this consisted of a new emphasis on "hegemony," originating in the re-discovering of Antonio Gramsci, and of how the power of the hegemonic classes could supposedly be broken, resulting in emancipation for persecuted classes of society, outside of the "workers." On the right, it consisted of neoconservatives who came to view what is sometimes today called the "clerisy," a

self-perpetuating, ever-expanding group dominating intellectual life and dependent on constant expansion of the size and scope of government, as a pernicious force in American life. This analysis starts off interesting, but quickly deteriorates once Rodgers starts taking cretins like Michel Foucault seriously, and we are told that incomprehensible lectures from *Discipline and Punish* are relevant to America. Relevant they may be, but only because they show that fools will always be fooled, and that the Emperor still has no clothes. Nonetheless, all this does a decent job of showing Rodgers's thesis of fracture, if for no other reason than that all these ways of viewing power are new and incompatible both with each other and with the traditional American view and practice of political power.

In the next chapter, Rodgers treats race, or rather "race and social memory." Here, things go a little off the rails. Most of the chapter talks about the African American experience of this era, and while new challenges and arguments arose, this has nothing to do with a new set of fractures, nor does Rodgers really make that claim. After all, the treatment of black Americans is the original fracture of our country, if anything is. Rodgers just seems to think race is important to America, which it is, but it's not important to his argument. This chapter also has some odd moments. Anita Hill is a conservative? *Black Athena* is anything but risible? It's only at the end of the chapter that Rodgers touches on the real element of fracture in the American view of race—the explosion in the last quarter of the century in splinter groups claiming a share of emancipation and demanding compensation, in competition with African Americans while trying to form coalitions with each other and with black Americans, trying to divide the pie into more pieces while somehow believing the pie magically increases in overall size. This process is apparently what is meant by "social memory," which appears to be a new buzzword for alleging how groups that are totally different with totally different histories can be fooled, or fool themselves, into thinking they have a common history, and therefore common interests, based on selectively focusing on ideologically advantageous past happenings. Certainly this rash of new identities, mostly fictional with fictional histories, which has today ended in the miasma of identity politics choking the Democratic Party, is a type of fracture, but this gets only two pages, when it should get the whole chapter.

The chapter "Gender and Certainty" then treats us, if that is the word, to the entire spectrum of feminist "thought" of this era. None of this rates any respect or attention, other than to note that Rodgers is entirely right that it created disaggregation, not least among American women, the vast majority of whom did not and do not regard themselves as represented by the likes of the late Adrienne Rich, Andrea Dworkin (similarly late and unlamented), Bell Hooks (who purports to spell her fake name lowercase, which I will not do, since name capitalization is a universal convention, not a choice by the named individual), and so forth. Rodgers does his best to make the tripe of these authors seem presentable, but he fails. On the other hand, he does present a good analysis of the internal conflicts among so-called feminists, as well as between them and mainstream American women. We are also treated to sidebars on Derrida and Lacan, which are not enjoyable, and we end with an attack on Allan Bloom, who, as with all conservative thinkers in this book, is on the surface addressed, but snidely dismissed without engaging with his ideas, usually with some personal attack (here, "an atheist and aesthete, a closeted homosexual").

Grinding onwards, we get a lengthy paean to the grossly overrated John Rawls, as well as a description of his conflict with the radical libertarian Robert Nozick. Rodgers's purpose is to draw attention to fresh splits among the ideas of political philosophers, including not only Rawls and Nozick, but also Michael Walzer and Burkean conservatives. The point of this chapter ("The Little Platoons of Society") is to try to ridicule and dismiss conservatives through a superficially neutral analysis. At this point, the book begins to dissolve into a morass, touching on everything from (illegal) campus speech codes (allegedly "designed to preserve an open commons of ideas from those who shouted and intimidated"—ha ha), to conservatives who "imagined [that word again] that university faculties had fallen into the hands of ideological enemies," to Charles Murray's analysis of lower class struggles in *Losing Ground* (denigrated as "tendentious" and "slipshod," though as always with no argument, citation or evidence of that being so). Since the chapter is propaganda, not analysis, Rodgers proves completely unable to keep any line of thought together, making it worthless.

Throughout the book Rodgers not infrequently betrays a complete lack of understanding of the conservative political ecosystem. He

repeatedly insists that conservatives have an enormous, powerful, and wealthy network of foundations, institutes, and so forth, which train young conservatives, fund conservative ideas, push conservative positions, and are the equal, if not the superior, of gigantic left-wing institutions, such as the Ford Foundation. This is just ludicrous—there is no such conservative infrastructure. The only relevant such conservative entity, the Heritage Foundation, as of 2015 had revenue of \$92 million and assets of \$270 million (according to ProPublica). In the same year, the Ford Foundation had revenue of \$658 million and assets of \$12.4 billion. And the Ford Foundation is only one of scores of wealthy leftist agitprop groups, not to mention allied entities, such as the entirety of the news-setting media and academia, all of which work in active coordination to aggressively force left-wing interests onto every part of society. There is simply no comparison between conservatives and liberals in the funding of ideas. Rodgers further belittles himself by making facially implausible and demonstrably false claims, for example that “The public-interest litigation networks that had been critically important players in the left-liberal quest for justice began to be matched by an equally powerful phalanx of public-interest litigation organizations on the right engaged in the same task of translating grievances into justiciable language to catch the ear of activist judges.” This is the purest fantasy on every level—he names no such right-wing organizations, because there are none; and there has been no attempt, much less success, by conservatives, to read their political positions into law by activist judges, who simply do not exist on the right in the same way as they exist on the left. (They should, and they need to, but that is another discussion.) Ruling by judicial fiat is a solely leftist tool, and has been for a hundred years. And note, again, the subtle left-wing twist Rodgers adds—leftists “quest for justice,” conservatives push “grievances.”

Rodgers continues this line of attack with criticism of originalism as a method of Constitutional interpretation. He clearly understands almost nothing of this area, but that doesn't stop him from making wild claims, such as that originalism “reimagined the Constitution” (that word again!) He wonders endlessly why originalism became a formal method of interpretation in this era, making no appearance before then, apparently unable to grasp the simple truth that prior to this era it would have been regarded as unnecessary to debate the need

to tie the Constitution to its text and history, since nobody had tried to wrench the Constitution wholly from its moorings and turn it into a tool of left-wing domination by entirely ignoring both text and history, in order to create rights such as the “right” to abortion out of whole cloth, under the aegis of, but without any actual tie to, the Constitution. Originalism was, and is, a response to this distortion, in the same way that certain antiviral drugs were created in response to AIDS, not needed before the plague came upon us.

Finally, Rodgers tacks on a coda about 9/11, noting that “Crisis events rattle, even if only momentarily, an intellectual culture’s certainties. They bring into focus some of the alternatives running below the surface. They hold suspended in the air, for a moment, some of that intellectual culture’s multiple possibilities.” I entirely agree that this is true of crises, and I intend to explore elsewhere how this can best be turned to my, and our, advantage. But note, again, the crippling disability Rodgers imposes on his analysis by only always and ever viewing “intellectual culture” as the only important part of society. This is the prime error of *Age of Fracture*—it begins with the premise that ideas are important, and immediately morphs that into the conclusion that ideas are everything. For Rodgers, ideas precede and supersede the actual people that make up actual societies. But the truth is that ideas are only part of a society and an era, and while they may drive some times more than others, to the extent they diverge from reality, reality will always reassert itself, as the arc of Communism proved. In a similar manner, the arc of modern progressivism, for all its talk of breaking hegemony and being on the right side of history, is certain to end not in a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but in the landfill. The question, though, is what will replace it? From this perspective, fracture is merely the symptom of oncoming change, and while I suppose Rodgers does an adequate job of laying out, if not an adequate job of analyzing, some recent lines of fracture, at the end of the day reading this book is mostly a waste of time. My time, more specifically.