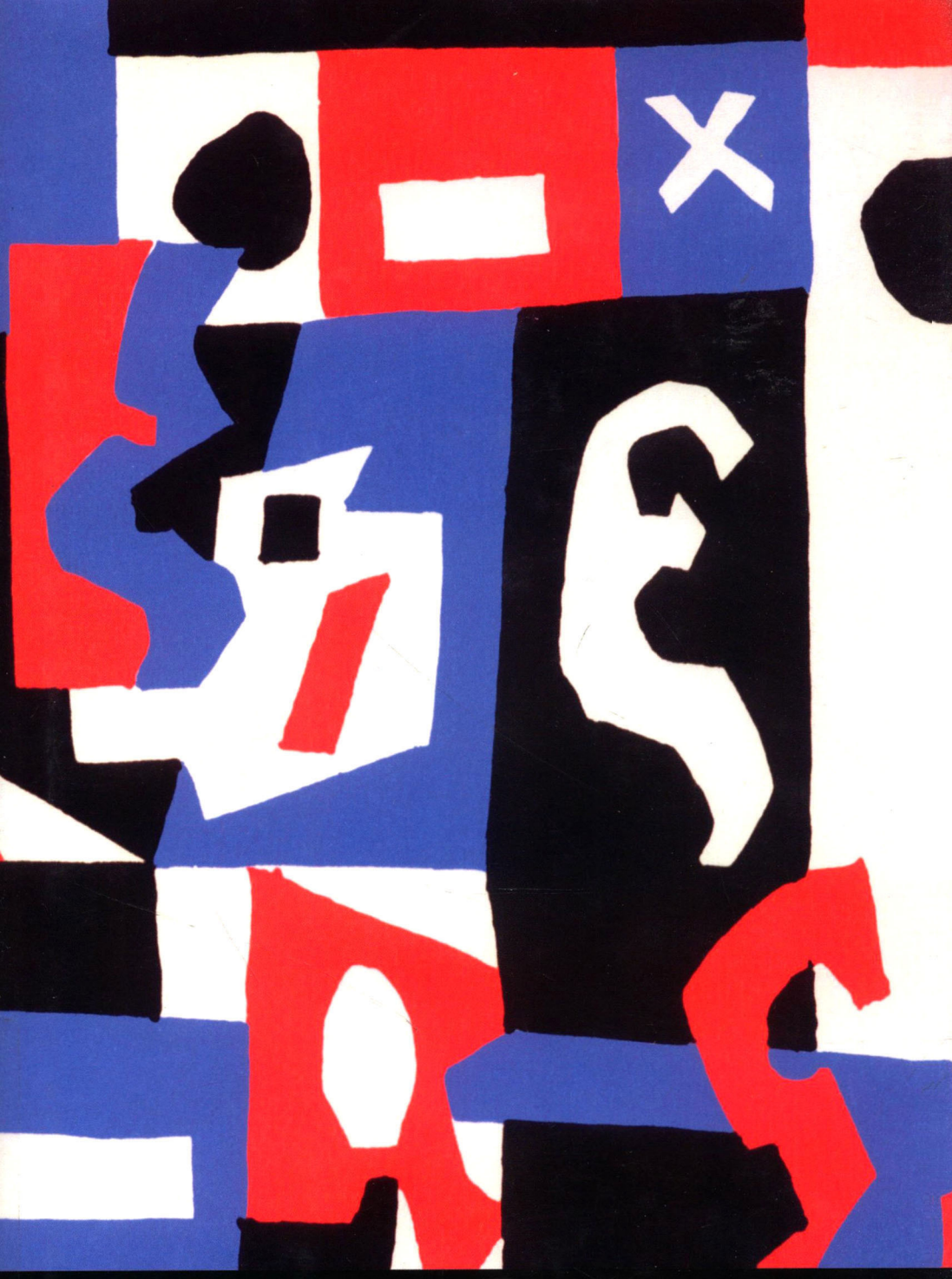

AGE OF FRACTURE

DANIEL T. RODGERS

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Once again, for Rene

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Prologue

It's a war of ideas.

"There were words," Peggy Noonan wrote of her stint in the Reagan White House. "There were phrases: Personnel is policy and ideas have consequences and ideas drive politics and it's a war of ideas." People kept big books splayed open on their reading tables, she remembered: Paul Johnson's *Modern Times* and Jean-François Revel's *How Democracies Perish* on conservatives' tables; Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* and William Julius Wilson's *Truly Disadvantaged* on their liberal counterparts', had she seen them. The half-opened books were there so that their ideas and phrases could be soaked up and deployed in conversation and argument. They were there to display the kind of person their owners were. They were there as tokens in a multisided contest of arguments and social visions that ranged across the late twentieth century.[1]

"It's a war of ideas" was a particularly prominent slogan among conservatives. "It may not be with rockets and missiles, but it is a war nevertheless," Paul Weyrich, one of the architects of new right politics sounded the call to arms in the late 1970s. "It is a war of ideology, it's a war of ideas, it's a war about our way of life. And it has to be fought with the same intensity, I think, and dedication as you would fight a shooting war." Describing the Heritage Foundation's mission to a *Time* magazine reporter in 1986, the foundation's vice president leaned on the same language to explain, "We are the intellectual shock troops of the conservative revolution." When the free-market advocacy organization the Madison Group launched a newsletter in 1990, it titled its publication *Intellectual Ammunition*.[2] But the sense that ideas had far-reaching conse-

quences, that the course of history could turn on framing and agenda setting, on struggles on the intangible fields of the mind, was not limited to conservatives. What was the nation itself, Bill Clinton asked a Georgetown University audience in 1995, but "an idea"? Not a product of experiment and social experience, as a common phrase from the 1950s had had it; not the amalgam of habits and institutions that was said to constitute the "American way" in another prominent Cold War expression. "America is an idea," Clinton insisted. "This country is an idea."[3]

Contests over ideas are, of course, no monopoly of the recent past. Political and social struggles have always turned not simply on the question of who should rule but also, and at least as consequentially, on what ideas of society and the self, morality and justice, should dominate. The rights of man, the indissoluble permanence of the Union, the prerogatives of property, the special world mission of the United States: they were all ideas laid across the messier realities of experience, helping to construct its character and possibilities, framing and polarizing its meanings. "What rules the world is ideas, because ideas define the way reality is perceived," Irving Kristol put the point in 1975.[4]

Still, if struggles over the intellectual construction of reality are inherent in all human societies, Kristol and his contemporaries were not wrong to sense that they took on new breadth and intensity in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Novel forms of intellectual production and dissemination—more politically oriented think tanks, new journals of scholarly debate and opinion, more argumentatively structured media—now began to move ideas more aggressively into circulation. More entrepreneurial university settings heightened the stakes of the intradisciplinary wars that fractured the law schools, the economics faculties, and the literature departments. Most striking of all was the range across which the intellectual assumptions that had defined the common sense of public intellectual life since the Second World War were challenged, dismantled, and formulated anew.

Those multisited battles and their consequences are the subject of this book. It is a history of the ways in which understandings of identity, society, economy, nation, and time were argued out in the last decades of the century, and how those struggles of books and mind changed the ways in which social reality itself would be imagined. It is not a story that falls into the neat left-right camps that the partisans of the "war of ideas" slo-

gan imagined. But neither is it a tale of isolated arguments. Across the multiple fronts of ideational battle, from the speeches of presidents to books of social and cultural theory, 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 choice, 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.

When it comes to the naming of ages, the cultural critic Stuart Hall writes, "What is important are the significant *breaks*—where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes."[5] We are still learning to think of the last quarter of the twentieth century in this manner as a coherent period in the history of the United States. The journalists' and popular historians' propensity to punctuate by decades—1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, each with its own putative style, character, and decade-end summings up—interrupts the effort to map out longer narratives. Presidents and contending presidential administrations loom larger than life over the recent past, not the least the president that Peggy Noonan wrote for and venerated, Ronald Reagan. No other figure loomed larger on the political stage than Reagan or impressed his convictions and personality onto the political culture more forcefully. But too sharp a sense of break at Reagan's 1980 election simplifies and distorts. The decisive realignment election that political observers anticipated all through the period, waiting for the Republican party to sweep aside its rival as the Democratic party had so dramatically done in 1932, failed to take place.[6] Divided, not unitary, government was the rule in the last quarter of the century. Reagan's presidency was spent facing off against a Democratic House of Representatives, most of Clinton's against a Republican one. The age was not Reagan's in remotely the way that the 1930s were Roosevelt's. If we are to look for clearer historical fault lines, we must look elsewhere than to presidential elections.

Even the "1960s"—that explosive decade and a half in culture and politics that began with the sit-ins of black students in Greensboro and Nash-

ville in 1960 in defiance of racial segregation and had barely lost its intensity by the time of the mass wave of antiwar protests in 1972 and the angry confrontation between white and black Bostonians over school integration in 1974—did not change the world as fully as its protagonists had hoped or its antagonists had feared. The upheavals of the 1960s etched a vivid trail of anger and memory. "The Sixties, I have come to believe, are something of a political Rorschach test," the editor Joseph Epstein wrote in what was already a truism by 1988. "Tell me what you think of that period, and I shall tell you what your politics are."[7] But for all the shock waves they set off in society and culture, and for all the ways in which their slogans could be found lodged in incongruously diverse places in later years, the social movements of the 1960s did not, in the end, set the forms into which the shaken pieces would be recast. The 1960s were a moment of break, but the regrouping around a different set of premises and themes, as Hall describes it, was the work of the era that followed.

The axis of that regrouping in the last quarter of the century was a reformulation, in idea and imagination, of concepts of "society." Strong readings of society had been one of the major intellectual projects of the middle decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to mid-nineteenth-century notions of the self as a free-standing, autonomous production of its own will and ambition, twentieth-century social thinkers had encircled the self with wider and wider rings of relations, structures, contexts, and institutions. Human beings were born into social norms, it was said. Their life chances were sorted out according to their place in the social structure; their very personalities took shape within the forces of socialization. Societies divided up people into castes and classes, even as they aggregated them under the pressure of the mass media and mass society's ways of life. The forces of history swept over them. Structuralist interpretations of society and culture of this sort ran hard through the big books of the postwar years: C. Wright Mills's *White Collar,* Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism,* and David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd.* They fueled the rise of social psychology, modal personality studies, social relations theory, functionalist and structuralist sociology, and projects of social modernization. They were absorbed into much of 1960s social thought, as rebels against the dominant culture resisted through the invention of countersolidarities and structural concepts of their own: the "system,"

the "movement," the "one-dimensional" entrapments of commercial cultural life.[8] Actual social life was never this tightly organized. Fissures and contradictions ran all through it. Still, to know the pressures of society on the self was, in mid-twentieth-century America, to speak within the bounds of the prevailing common sense of the matter.

But then in the last quarter of the century, through more and more domains of social thought and argument, the terms that had dominated post–World War II intellectual life began to fracture. One heard less about society, history, and power and more about individuals, contingency, and choice. The importance of economic institutions gave way to notions of flexible and instantly acting markets. History was said to accelerate into a multitude of almost instantaneously accessible possibilities. Identities became fluid and elective. Ideas of power thinned out and receded. In political and institutional fact and in social imagination, the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s had been an era of consolidation. In the last quarter of the century, the dominant tendency of the age was toward disaggregation.

The terrain of this process was the field of ideas and perception, not, in the first instance, society itself. Toward the end of the era, in an argument that raced almost instantly through the sociology and political science seminars, Robert Putnam claimed that levels of civic association in the United States had, in sober fact, declined in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. "Bowling Alone," he titled the phenomenon, in reference to the precipitous decline in weekly bowling leagues, but he meant by it something much deeper than shifts in recreational life. What worried Putnam was that more and more Americans bowling their way through modern life alone, without the voluntary associational support of neighbors and fellow citizens, threatened to deplete the fabric of civic trust and social capital that Tocqueville and others had thought so foundational to American life. When reworked and challenged by others, however, Putnam's data turned out to be messier than he had supposed. There were, indeed, fewer bowling leagues by the 1990s than before. Labor union membership had declined precipitously, falling to half its level when the age began. The supply of women eager for volunteer opportunities had been sharply diminished by the massive movement of women into the paid labor force after 1970. But other associations held their own or flourished. Volunteering rates among teenagers rose, megachurches boomed, and advocacy groups of all sorts grew dramatically.[9]

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What characterized the age of fracture was not a literal thinning out of associational life. In an age of Oprah, MTV, and charismatic religious preaching, the agencies of socialization were different from before, but they were not discernibly weaker. Social structures persisted. What changed, across a multitude of fronts, were the ideas and metaphors capable of holding in focus the aggregate aspects of human life as opposed to its smaller, fluid, individual ones.

In accounting for the transformations in ideas and culture that reshaped the last quarter of the twentieth century, three sharply different explanations have been offered. The first posits a shift in the nation's core psyche and character. It was the "me decade," the journalist Tom Wolfe wrote famously in 1976: an age obsessed with self-referentiality. The nation, this line of reasoning argues, was caught up in an "age of greed," a new "culture of narcissism," a collapse of faith in public institutions, a pell-mell, selfish rush into a myriad of private lifestyle communities. The advice of the soon-to-be-imprisoned investor Ivan Boesky becomes, in this reading, the motto of the age: "Greed is all right, by the way," Boesky told the University of California business school's graduating class in 1986 in one of the most quoted snippets of the decade. "I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy."[10]

Selfishness there was aplenty in the age of fracture and new institutional ways in which the powers of money could be exercised and magnified. But the notion of a national mood or psyche is the illusion of writers and journalists hard-pressed by a deadline. Wolfe was struck by the ways in which the people he met talked not about wealth but obsessively about themselves, as if they had taken their psychoanalytic sessions public. Christopher Lasch, who made the "culture of narcissism" phrase famous, insisted that he had been misread to suggest that the nation had turned in on the self; what worried him, to the contrary, was that the intrusive therapeutic operations of late-capitalist society had made selves all but empty. Only a tiny sliver of the population actually lived in gated communities. To imagine a national mood across a society as diverse as the United States is to fall into the language of partisans of the time rather than to explain it.[11]

A second and more powerful explanation looks to changes in the insti-

tutions of intellectual life. In this reading of late-twentieth-century U.S. history, the key to the age was the conscious efforts of conservative intellectuals and their institutional sponsors to reshape not only the terms of political debate but the mechanics of intellectual production itself. By the late 1970s, Nixon's former secretary of the Treasury, the Wall Street investor William E. Simon, was urging that "the only thing that can save the Republican Party . . . is a counterintelligentsia," created by funneling funds to writers, journalists, and social scientists whose ideas had been frozen out of general circulation by the "dominant socialist-statist-collectivist orthodoxy" prevailing in the universities and the media.[12]

Within a decade, Simon's project had dramatically reshaped the production and dissemination of ideas. Older foundations, Simon's Olin Foundation in the lead, turned into conscious incubators of new conservative ideas, publicizing books and sponsoring authors, subsidizing student organizations and newspapers, and establishing university positions and programs for the promotion of ideas more favorable to business enterprise—all with the intent of changing the prevailing terms of debate. With corporate and entrepreneurial support, a global network of conservative think tanks proliferated to advance market-sympathetic ideas and speed their way aggressively into media and political debate. Journals and newspapers were floated on new conservative money. Publishers staked out claims in the newly politicized intellectual market, some playing one side of the intensifying war of ideas, others, like the Free Press, Basic Books, and the *New Republic,* playing both. In time, many of the leading figures in these new conservative institutions established themselves on the television cable news and talk shows, where argument flourished as a new form of sporting contest. By the end of the century, liberal funders and foundations that had once been more interested in sponsoring practical, on-the-ground ventures in social change than in books and press releases were actively playing at the idea-promotion game.[13]

The work of the conservative idea brokers changed the landscape of publication and intellectual argument. Their products will be visible in every one of the chapters to follow. Yet both sympathetic and critical observers of the counterintelligentsia project are inclined to overestimate its efficacy. In some areas—the law and economics movement in the legal

faculties, the hardening terms of debate over policy toward the poor, the creation of the Federalist Society as a fraternity of like-minded law students and faculty, and the elaboration of a neoconservative foreign policy—the work of the conservative intellectual establishment was decisive. But extensive foundation funding for Richard Herrnstein's and Charles Murray's *Bell Curve* could not make its neo-eugenicism respectable or turn the *New Criterion* into a major scholarly journal. Heavily subsidized writers like Dinesh D'Souza rose and fell from grace. Many conservative public policy projects, despite weighty institutional backing, fell apart: monetarism in the early 1980s, the Social Security privatization project in the 1990s. The largest liberal foundations—Ford, Carnegie, and, by the mid-1980s, MacArthur—had far deeper pockets than the conservative ones. The budget of the liberal and centrist Brookings Institution was consistently larger than that of its conservative rival, the American Enterprise Institute.[14]

But more important, the era's key intellectual shifts cannot be pinned to any single part of the political spectrum. Ideas slipped across the conventional divisions of politics, often incongruously and unpredictably. Deregulation was a radical project before it became a conservative one. The first practical school voucher proposals were the work of liberal social scientists. The fracture of the social—though it took different terms and operated through different analytical languages—was, in the end, as much a product of left-leaning intellectuals as it was of the new intellectual right. The notion of a conservative age in American intellectual life, like the notion of Reagan's domination of the era's politics, harbors only half the truth.

A third family of explanations stresses not mood nor politics nor institutions of intellectual production but the deep structures of the late-capitalist economy. In this reading of the age, the precipitant of its cultural and intellectual transformations was the collapse of the high-wage, high-benefits "Fordist" economy that had dominated post–World War II American society. In the course of the economic crisis of the 1970s, profit margins were squeezed more intensely than before. Corporatist compromises between labor and management unraveled; manufacturers went abroad in search of cheaper labor; corporations hollowed themselves out by outsourcing all but a few core activities; production of goods

and services moved from an inventory to a just-in-time basis. Fordism gave way to flexible accumulation, with its much shorter time horizons, much shallower institutional investments, and global extension. On this far-reaching change in structure, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and others have argued, the superstructures of "postmodern" culture changed to fit. Selves became more flexible and less unitary, time horizons shrank, artistic forms that had been radically separated in space and time collapsed into each other, attention moved from structures to surfaces. In the "cultural logic of late capitalism," as Jameson termed it, the structuralist assumptions of post–World War II social thought shattered and dissolved.[15]

This is an argument that must be taken seriously. Histories of the late twentieth century now routinely point to the Arab-Israeli War and Arab nations' oil boycott of 1973 as a critical hinge point in global economic history.[16] The subsequent shifts in the U.S. economy from production to finance, and from national to global scale, helped make just-in-time delivery of everything from computer chips to ideas part of the fabric of social life. Where everything circulated more rapidly, older understandings of social life in terms of institutions, solidarities, or the pressure of history could not help losing some of their force. Where the instruments of finance came ever closer to most Americans' lives—in pension stock funds, balloon-rate mortgages, leveraged buyouts, corporate restructuring, and plant closings—it was not surprising that the language of market economics should travel with them, seeping into new terrains of social imaginations.

Still, the notion that economic structures moved first, carrying ideas in their wake, does not adequately explain the age. Economies are rooted not only in structures of exchange but also, and just as fundamentally, in ideas, practices, norms, and conventions. The victory of the new models of market action that reconstituted economic theory for the age was already an accomplished fact by the end of the 1970s, well before anyone clearly discerned the new shape of the global economy. Arguments over selves and identities were not simply a reflex of the world's capital markets. What precipitates breaks and interruptions in social argument are not raw changes in social experience, which never translate automatically into mind. What matters are the processes by which the flux and tensions of experience are shaped into mental frames and pictures that,

in the end, come to seem themselves natural and inevitable: ingrained in the very logic of things.

This book endeavors to tell a history of these acts of mind and imagination and the ways in which they changed America in the late twentieth century. It is not the narrative of a single movement of ideas that swept everything before it but an account of the ways in which contemporaries, working within the stock of ideas they possessed, tried to make sense of their times, and how through those very efforts—through argument and imagination, marginalization of some ideas and victories for others—the categories for social thinking were themselves remade. It is a story of the debates across a half-dozen fronts through which Americans tried to reimagine themselves and their society: the economic crisis of the 1970s, the new shape of finance capitalism and global markets, the struggle to hold identities stable where race and gender proved unnervingly divisive, the linguistic turn in culture in an age of commercial and malleable signifiers, the nature of freedom and obligation in a multicultural and increasingly unequal society, and the collapse of Communism. Social thought clustered on these and other problematics. These were the nubs on which issues were forced, assumptions shattered, ideas broached, categories naturalized, paradigms strained and reconstituted. No logic was already locked into them. Thinking in modern societies—that is to say, in the diverse and intellectually compartmentalized societies of modern times—is piecemeal, context-driven, occasional, and (even if the task is to unknot an intellectual puzzle) instrumental.

What crossed between these widely flung fronts of thought and argument was not a single, dominant idea—postmodern, new right, or neoliberal—but a contagion of metaphors. Intellectual models slipped across the normal divisions of intellectual life. Market ideas moved out of economics departments to become the new standard currency of the social sciences. Certain game theory set-pieces—the free-rider problem, the prisoner's dilemma, the tragedy of the commons—became fixtures of common sense. Fluid, partial notions of identity, worked out in painful debates among African-American and women's movement intellectuals, slipped into universal usage. Protean, spill-over words like "choice" were called upon to do more and more work in more and more diverse circum-

stances. In the process some words and phrases began to seem more natural than the rest—not similes or approximations but reality itself.

It was an age of such contagions. Arguments poached on parallel debates around them, reworking their claims and concepts—markets, identities, rights—for new occasions. For all the hyperspecialization of modern intellectual life, the boundaries between its arenas were always porous and open to raiding. To watch one traveling, versatile set of ideas lose value to another, across a diverse array of uses and arguments, is to see a historic intellectual shift in action.

Ideas moved first in the arena of economic debate. The modern concept of markets as fields of natural, optimizing, rational choice was not the dominant analytical language of post-1945 macroeconomics. The revival of market ideology was a product of attempts to rethink the core paradigms of economics during the global economic crisis of the 1970s: a product of contest, rivalry, paradigmatic exhaustion, and innovation that was to have profound effects on the social thought of the age. That contest, its key players, and its unexpected outcomes are the subject of Chapter 2. Reconceptualizations of power are the subject of Chapter 3. By definition, perfect markets operate free of coercion in a world of mutual consent. But the market models spilling out of the economics departments into the law schools and social science faculties in the 1970s and 1980s did not eliminate the need for concepts of power: where it was lodged, who held it, and how it worked in an age of investment capital. Drawing on new class theory or rational-choice models, on concepts of culture and hegemony, or on the long shadow cast by Michel Foucault's work, scholarly and popular writers struggled to find a language of power where power itself seemed to shift shapes so rapidly.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to debates over identity. The first, on race and social memory, throws us into the ways in which arguments over the politics, obligations, and finally the very essence of race came into contest in the age of fracture. The era began with Alex Haley's sweeping historical account of kin and memory; it ended with race in question marks. Sisterhood, the subject of Chapter 5, disaggregated in much the same way, as conceptions of womanhood became more multiple and fractured, and gender and sexuality themselves were reconceived as performative and

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