

Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2012), ISBN: 9780691141565.

Historians understand that a decade is always longer than ten years. This maxim is illustrated in Thomas Borstelmann's new book, *The 1970's: A new Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. It begins in 1968 and ends sometime in the Eighties, during the Reagan Era. More importantly, the book makes a prior decade - the wild Sixties - peacefully evolve into the Seventies and beyond, and assumes that the decade following, the conservative Eighties, somehow discordantly and chaotically began in the Seventies.

The 1970's is an intellectual adventure clearly anchored in U.S. history, although it enjoys moving along a 'glocal' (local communities thinking globally) narrative. Borstelmann envisions a retreat of politics from the international stage and the assurgency of free-market ideology all over the world. At the same time, individualism becomes a civic religion, and economic insecurity a permanent feature of mass culture. With this backdrop Borstlemann begins, in Chapter One, by examining both national and international crises, followed in the next chapter by focusing on the relationship between Civil Rights and U.S. democratic reform. Borstlemann wastes little time delving into free market ideology: discussing it on a local, state, and national level in Chapter Three, followed in the next chapter with the same free market ideology but on a global basis. Borstlemann concludes his book with a chapter on the resurgence of religious movements, especially the religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world of the Middle East and Christian evangelism in America. Finally, in Chapter Six, he proposes an articulated synthesis of increasing social equality and the mounting economic inequality of the Seventies.

Bortstelmann's underlying argument is that the Seventies were more important than historians realise. This is not a new argument. Historians such as Schulman (*The Seventies: The Great Shift in*

American Culture, Society, and Politics), and Berkowitz (*Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies*) both made the same arguments in their own right. Schulman affirmed the Seventies needed re-examination, pointing to a major shift of balance and power in American politics, culture, and economy; Berkowitz assumed the end of postwar economics and sceptical attitudes towards government's ability to positively affect society were balanced by the successful protests of women, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities in order to achieve greater legal rights and social recognition. Editor Dan Berger's book *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* is a recent addendum to the list. At the same time, the reaction to these social movements as well as the issue of abortion gave birth to conservative religious organizations. Consequently, the Seventies were not a decade of transition, a grey interlude, but a time of renewal and regeneration.

Similarly, Borstelmann also argues that the 1970s are definitely not an "in-between" decade, but articulates his point in a more sophisticated way. His fundamental argument is that in the Seventies, the United States became a more inclusive and less equal society. In this decade, two unrelated trends shaped the American cultural mind-set and established themselves in the international stage - namely an increasing social inclusiveness and a rising economic inequality. Not coincidentally, the two characters portrayed on the cover page of the book are the leaders of the civil rights movement. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and the icon of the modern conservative movement, President Ronald Reagan.

How did this complex shift happen? Borstelmann explains that, because of the accumulating social frustration and disappointment caused by Vietnam War, economic downturn, and Watergate, faith in the private sector and the individual replaced trust in the federal government and society. Keynesian macroeconomic management retreated and the free market surged. At the same time, however, the same federal government and the state legislations retained the path of the previous decade and extended civil rights to women, people with disabilities, and racial

and ethnic minorities. As a result, democracy became more inclusive and opened its doors to new constituencies.

In search of a recognizable symbol of that decade, Borstelmann avoids the obvious, revealing a clear preference for the less obvious Jimmy Carter. A ‘man of his times,’ a contradiction in terms, an outsider in politics, and a Southerner with a taste for racial integration, Carter was a business man, and an egalitarian Democrat.¹ He was a free-market devotee and yet a conservative evangelical. According to Borstelmann, Carter ‘embodied the egalitarian, market-oriented individualism’ of the Seventies.² The first president to refer to himself as a ‘born-again Christian,’ the only president to appeal to the ecological conscience of his American fellows, the weak president of the Tehran hostage crisis, the idealistic president that appealed to the puritan tradition of selling to Americans a plan of austerity. In choosing Carter rather than Richard Nixon as the polar character of the Seventies, Borstelmann inevitably locates the focal point of the decade in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate period.

The central thesis, more democracy and free market, creates a consistent narrative that has the disadvantage of minimising social crisis and the cultural damages of rising inequality. If anything is missing in the book, it is the desperation of a generation of minority people entrapped in a resurgent racial apartheid, the disillusion of the Vietnam veterans coming back home, and the frustration of a middle class at risk. If anything might be included in the book, perhaps it was the blood of the soldiers in Vietnam and the starvation of the poor at home. What Borstelmann sometimes describes as a barbeque party in the backyard was also a painful walk in the desert. That said, *The 1970s. A new Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* offers a masterful reconstruction of the main political events, principal characters, and cultural traits of the decade.

¹ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A new Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2012), p. 270.

² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

It is a compelling narrative of inclusion and inequality, the historical saga of a generation, and a remarkable addition to the growing body of literature focused on the Seventies.

Enrico Beltramini³

Notre Dame de Namur University

³ Enrico Beltramini's (ebeltramini@ndnu.edu) academic interests are primarily Church and business history. He holds an MBA, an MPhil in Religious Studies, and a PhD in Business Science. His PhD thesis in U.S. History is on the civil rights movement.