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Review of "The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality"

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Thomas Borstelmann. *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

In *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (2012), Thomas Borstelmann provides a well-written, accessible account of "the forgettable decade." His argument is straightforward: the United States became more equal in terms of accepting individual differences (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) while simultaneously becoming more unequal in terms of wealth. In this regard, Borstelmann identifies the 1970s as the pivotal decade for understanding the world in which we currently live, especially regarding the importance of human rights. In doing so, Borstelmann challenges prior historical assessments that the Sixties and Eighties were the most important decades that defined and redefined the recent past. Despite offering a novel, thought-provoking interpretation of the Seventies, though, Borstelmann's narrative suffers from one serious flaw: a simplistic argument that perpetuates what social studies educators call the "freedom quest narrative."

Borstelmann views the period from 1973 to 1979 as a transformative period of U.S.—and world—history. Domestic and international events justify putting emphasis on these seven years. Nineteen seventy-three presented numerous challenges—Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein began their exposé on Watergate, the post-World War II Bretton Woods system ended, American troops withdrew from Vietnam, and U.S. support for Israel in the Yom Kippur War served as a catalyst for the oil embargo from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Nineteen seventy-nine, on the other hand, presented a host of other crises: Iranians revolted against the Shah and then held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days; the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, thus reintroducing a Cold Warrior foreign policy;¹ and the American president, Jimmy Carter, lectured the nation about a "crisis of confidence," warning that "piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose."² All of these events challenged Americans' notions of exceptionalism.

The period from 1973 to 1979, in Borstelmann's estimation, was one of growing equality and increasing inequality. Let us first consider increasing inequality, as Borstelmann's extraordinarily persuasive on this point. *The 1970s* documents the adoption of free market reforms that influence the transition from active citizenship to individual consumption. The federal government began the process of deregulation, beginning with Wall Street and the airlines, and lowering taxes for those making the most. This period ushered in a new economic egalitarianism, one that included all within an economic system "marked by individual choice, the logic of consumer capitalism" (17). Economic egalitarianism, though, did not mean equal gains for all. The middle-class, never mind the poor, suffered. In 1973, the number of Americans living in poverty was at its lowest. By 1976, however, only 40 percent of American jobs provided enough in wages to support the average family, as rapid inflation robbed families' purchasing power (81).

¹ Historians have argued that Jimmy Carter was a Cold Warrior despite the attention often paid to his emphasis on human rights and arms limits. See John Dumbrell's *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995) for this argument.

² "Crisis of Confidence," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis/>.



By the end of the decade, an unfair economic situation existed in the U.S., one made familiar by the recent Occupy Wall Street protests: “The biggest changes dating from 1979 came at the very top of the income pyramid. The top 1 percent of Americans hauled in 80 percent of the total gains in taxable income over the next three decades” (63). The “one percent” would thus benefit in an age where the government professed increasing faith in the free market, deregulation, and low taxes.

Borstelmann also points to the 1970s as a pivotal decade for increasing tolerance of identity difference. African Americans, women, Native Americans, gay men and lesbians—each of these groups gained precious rights and recognition during the Seventies. For example, gender became a social construct for many, as “male and female seemed to represent large circles that overlapped to a considerable extent, depending on the criteria being measured, instead of completely separate circles” (74). Women began entering the professions in large numbers during the 1970s, with the share of female lawyers rising 11 percent, physicians 4 percent, and engineers 3 percent. Each was a large jump in terms of percentage change. Women were not the only group to experience gains, though, as Harvey Milk became the first gay man elected city counselor of a major U.S. city and many states either overturned or stopped prosecuting homosexuals under anti-sodomy laws. In addition to this, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders (83, 106).

The concern for individual rights extended across U.S. borders, as a reaction to the Holocaust, the end of formal (i.e., legal) racial inequality in the U.S., and the onset of détente made politicians and the American populace receptive to human rights (180). As part of his argument that the transformations in the United States had important implications for the rest of the world, Borstelmann highlights the rhetoric of human rights in the U.S. Congressional hearings increasingly focused on issues related to human rights between 1974 and 1976, partly in response to the successful political posturing of groups like Amnesty International.³ In 1975, the Jackson-Vanik amendment explicitly linked U.S. foreign aid to “most-favored-nation” status, threatening the Soviet Union if that nation did not liberalize its Jewish emigration policy. In 1978, Argentina lost all of its military aid due to its human rights violations. In addition, Borstelmann accounts for the transition from Nixon and Kissinger’s belief that only the external behavior of other governments mattered to Carter’s insistence that America should also care about the way nations treat those within their own borders. Put simply, “Carter believed that American interests included the decent treatment of all peoples everywhere,” even in non-communist countries (112, 184). Importantly, human rights became a popular bipartisan issue, with Republicans and Democrats in agreement about promoting the decent treatment of political dissidents throughout the world (183).

Although thought-provoking, Borstelmann’s thesis is too simplistic. More specifically, Borstelmann fails to demonstrate the interconnection between growing economic inequality and increasing tolerance of difference. He conflates free market capitalism with respect for individual

³ See Samuel Moyn’s *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012) for Amnesty International’s rapid growth. Particularly interesting is the transition from the widespread belief in creating utopian societies (a Sixties belief) to saving one life (an effective AI strategy).



rights, pointing to the rise in divorce rates as an example of America “moving simultaneously toward greater egalitarianism and toward greater faith in the free market...” (175).⁴ In regards to expanding the domestic market, Borstelmann writes that “the two developments were related,” that “free markets provided benefits for buyers and sellers alike,” and that “[i]t made no economic sense to exclude potential customers or workers on the basis of a group identity such as race or sex” (313). Borstelmann recognizes the racism, sexism, and homophobia survived the 1970s. (In fact, he makes this point at various junctions in the narrative.)⁵ But *The 1970s* lacks much analysis about political acts that denied opportunities to minorities and women. For example, Borstelmann highlights the ways growing economic pressure forced white taxpayers, many of whom saw themselves as paying for medical, educational, and other services for blacks and Latinos, to vote against politicians who and referenda that supported these services (156). Evidence from California’s Proposition 13, not to mention the harsh reaction to school busing, highlights that support for minorities stopped when it involved “high taxes” and racially integrated schools.

Borstelmann’s argument that the United States has grown increasingly tolerant of difference also reflects what social studies educators call the freedom quest narrative. Bruce VanSledright writes about the freedom quest narrative as a view that individuals have of the United States as a nation founded on individual liberty and the unregulated pursuit of happiness. As such, the nation became one that stood “the right to live and produce all [one’s] minds and hearts could desire, unobstructed by regulators who would tamper with [one’s] yearnings.”⁶ The freedom quest narrative is thus a march across history, one where the United States gradually bestows equality to all of its citizens. Is *The 1970s* different from the overly deterministic freedom quest narrative? Not really, as Borstelmann’s work ends up drawing the same conclusions: The United States enters a time where government no longer discriminates based on identity. The problem, however, is that identity still matters: African American male imprisonment represents a “New Jim Crow,”⁷ Arizona passed an infamous “show us your papers” law supposedly targeting illegal immigrants, and women still do not earn equal pay.

⁴ Conflating free market principles with greater egalitarianism raises another important question: Did women move toward greater equality solely because their husbands’ paychecks could not “preserve their households’ standard of living”? Borstelmann highlights the change in the female workforce: “In 1970, 43 percent of American women age sixteen or over were in the paid workforce; in 1980, this number increased to 52 percent” (81). From these figures, it seems as though Borstelmann could have made a more compelling argument linking increasing economic inequality with greater acceptance of identity differences.

⁵ Borstelmann admits, “Of course, private prejudice and its very real negative impacts still endured—a powerful legacy of a bitter history. But the public expression of prejudice in the United States by the new millenium was furtive and usually costly” (5). In addition, Borstelmann points out that the terms “racist,” “sexist,” and “homophobic” become terms of “greatest opprobrium in American public life” (120). These are important observations, although Borstelmann provides little evidence in their support. The limited support Borstelmann supplies (e.g., Jerry Falwell’s transformation from a segregationist) are not entirely convincing.

⁶ Bruce VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2011) (24). See also Bruce VanSledright’s *In Search of America’s Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

⁷ Michelle Anderson, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012).



Readers might have additional qualms with Borstelmann's *The 1970s*. First, Borstelmann's assertion that the Seventies is the pivotal decade for understanding the world in which we currently live opens him up to accusations of presentism. Although historians agree with Benedetto Croce's dictum that "all history is contemporary history," few try to make such explicit connections between past and present.⁸ In addition, those looking for a *global* history, as the book's subtitle suggests, may be disappointed. Instead, readers will find a narrative focused on the United States and its role in international affairs. Borstelmann explains the world from an American point-of-view, offering little insight into the way that others viewed the U.S. Others might desire more about the connection between American identity politics and the increasing emphasis on human rights, especially considering Borstelmann's knowledge of the topic.⁹

These criticisms could be overly harsh, though, especially considering that any historical account of the Seventies faces several historiographic problems, two of which Borstelmann addresses. First, there remains the issue that the Seventies occurred not-so-long ago. For Borstelmann, this proposes "peculiar challenges," as "[o]ur perspective is still necessarily limited." Despite this, Borstelmann makes clear that "enough time has passed to begin to open up new perspectives on the significance of what happened then in the United States and the world" (xiii). In addition, the aforementioned criticisms do not address Borstelmann's efforts at reviving the 1970s from historical insignificance. As he writes, "The familiar narrative of the 1970s offers a largely depressing and forgettable decade, one most Americans were happy to see end" (3). The Vietnam War destroyed Americans' sense of exceptionalism, instilling a new sense of being a survivor. The United States was like other empires in history, many believed, facing similar challenges that others before it encountered: "In particular, it was an at least temporarily defeated imperial power in economic decline, marred by political corruption all the way to the top of its government" (9, 27). Although some would like to forget these events (especially Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran hostage crisis), as they are not particularly proud moments of the American past, Borstelmann reminds us that the Seventies remain an important decade in desperate need of historical study.

In *The 1970s*, Borstelmann has provided a coherent, easy-to-read one-volume account of an oft-forgotten decade. He reminds us that the 1970s are much more than a series of failed presidencies and disco; indeed, he makes a compelling case that this pivotal decade is as dynamic as the two that sandwich it.¹⁰ Although this review has criticized the central argument—that the

⁸ Borstelmann provides a warning about presentism. "Making sense of the present," he writes, "and deciding what to do about it, require understanding the past rather than trying to reshape it to fit our liking" (xiv). I like how Borstelmann phrases this, although I am not confident he succeeds in not shaping the past to fit the present. This does not mean that historians should not investigate the recent past, though. For as Gaddis Smith writes in *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), "Historians ought not to shy away from the recent past. Americans have very shallow memories," with "a particular fog covering those decades between what was formally learned in most history courses and the present..." (v).

⁹ See Thomas Borstelmann's *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) for details about race.

¹⁰ Regarding the "forgettable" 1970s, Borstelmann writes, "The decade's neighbors, chronologically speaking are part of the problem. Both the 1960s and the 1980s have clear story lines of strong reforming forces, exciting social and political conflicts, and significant international engagements" (3).



world has simultaneously grown more and less equal—Borstelmann should stimulate further historical debate and exploration as to how such an occurrence could happen. *The 1970s* helps explain why neither the Democrats, the party of equality, nor the Republicans, the party of free markets, have been able to decisively control the nation over the last three decades. By making these arguments, Borstelmann's able to recapture the drama and intrigue of a decade that is far more complex than the historiography has suggested.

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