1. The American welfare state from the 1930s to the 1960s

Introduction

Poverty has long been interpreted in many different ways. One particularly intriguing and enduring concept of poverty is the idea of an ‘underclass’. On the one hand, it appears to be embedded in human nature to regard a small minority at the bottom of society as somehow sub-human and very different from the rest of us. Seeming reluctance to work, alcoholism, drug dependency, mental instability, general unreliability, irresponsible child-rearing – these and other allegedly sub-human qualities are said to be the prime cause of their poverty and apparent social failure. A major problem is that in this version, the ‘underclass’ may be intergenerational and therefore only a serious re-education into economic respectability will achieve the desired result of a long-term behavioural improvement. Even worse is the implication that the transmission mechanisms may be more robust: if membership of the ‘underclass’ is hereditary, then only drastic measures to restrict fertility would cut its size. On the other hand, many (including this author) would argue that the ‘underclass’ concept is essentially a political construct – a long-standing, enduring and deeply flawed way of explaining inequality and even rationalising poverty, focusing very selectively on the alleged misbehaviours of those who happen to be at the bottom of society at a particular time. It is clear that the concept of an ‘underclass’ enjoys popularity in some economic conditions, but not others.

What is certain is that ‘underclass’ discourses in the United Kingdom go a long way back into history – back to at least the Old Poor Law in the late eighteenth century – and the concept has enjoyed periodic reconstructions over at least the last two hundred years. From Charles Booth’s speculative but empirically rigorous attempts to demonstrate that heredity played an important part in determining the likelihood of pauperism through to the concept of a ‘social problem group’, ‘problem families’,

the ‘culture of poverty’, the ‘cycle of deprivation’ and the modern ‘underclass’ idea, there has always been in the UK a view that social failure is in large part genetically or personally determined.¹

Likewise, the United States of America had its supporters of the broad ‘underclass’ idea stretching back into the early years of the twentieth century. Generally, the results of such research were inconclusive. Despite the claims, the idea of an intergenerational ‘underclass’ failed the standard tests applied by critics. To be sure, there were regions where fatherless families were quite common (such as Irish immigrants in Manhattan’s West Side, half of whom were at any one time in this state)² but they were regarded as very exceptional. Most notably, the full employment circumstances of the Second World War and, to a lesser extent, the period of virtual full employment in the 1950s seemed to draw a line under the whole idea of an intergenerational ‘underclass’ exhibiting a range of social problems. As one interviewee in Studs Terkel’s oral history put it,

I’m from Oklahoma and my whole subclass of culture of poverty happened to disappear with World War Two. All of a sudden us dumb Okies were not dumb Okies any more. We were capable of working in defence plants at two dollars per hour. I know a hell of a lot of people that felt guilty that it took a war to do it.³

Nevertheless, the idea of an ‘underclass’ began to resurface again in America in the 1960s and the UK in the 1970s with a worsening of economic conditions, rising unemployment and the challenges of globalisation. Its persistence as an explanation for poverty is curious, and one aim of this book is to explain the political purposes served by the whole idea of an ‘underclass’ in the USA from the late 1950s to the

¹ See, for example, John Macnicol, ‘In Pursuit of the Underclass’, *Journal of Social Policy*, 16, 3, July 1987, pp. 293–318; John Macnicol, ‘From “Problem Family” to “Underclass”, 1945–95’, in H. Fawcett and R. Lowe (eds), *Welfare Policy in Britain: The Road from 1945* (1999), pp. 69–93; John Macnicol, ‘Reconstructing the Underclass’, *Social Policy and Administration*, 16, 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 99–108; John Welshman, ‘In Search of the “Problem Family”: Public Health and Social Work in England and Wales, 1940–70’, *Social History of Medicine*, 9, 3, 1996, pp. 447–65; John Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded 1880–2000* (2006).

² Ken Auletta, *The Underclass* (1982), p. 42.

³ Studs Terkel, *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream* (1989), p. 32.

2000s – in other words, from the reinvention of the concept to its role in partly rationalising the welfare reforms of the Clinton administration and after. The analysis offered in this book is that the ‘underclass’ is basically a conservative concept, explaining poverty in terms of the failings of individuals. However, the fact that it also partly seduced many liberals indicates that it has always had a broad appeal – though, arguably, this appeal applied most to soft liberals who were all too easily persuaded of their wrongs and wished to atone for them.

The American Welfare State

The United States of America is often portrayed as a ‘welfare laggard’. On the face of it, this is undeniable and has become something of a cliché in American studies. It is a comforting notion, for it fits in neatly with the image of the USA as a paragon of rugged individualism. However, there is much debate over the accuracy of this labelling. It can divert attention from the USA’s long tradition of charitable effort far back into the nineteenth century, its comparatively large and well-developed provision of state-run education, its comprehensive social security system and the fact that it has the most expensive health care system in the world – even if a greater proportion of it is delivered wastefully by the private sector than is the case in most European societies. Much depends on what one includes as ‘social policy’, and how it is provided. For example, the US military has long boasted a highly developed and comprehensive welfare state for both its current and past employees. Again, some argue that a generous system of redistribution and transfer payments exists through fiscal welfare, via the generous subsidies, tax breaks and other concessions granted to business corporations. There is, in short, a large and generous welfare state for militarist and corporate America.

Confining oneself to what is conventionally thought of as ‘social policy’, however, one can discover elements of a nascent welfare state far back into history. A Charity Organization Society, modelled on Britain’s, existed from 1877, and there were numerous ‘settlement houses’ in the major cities, notably Chicago’s Hull House. A burgeoning social literature (such as Edward T. Devine’s *Misery and Its Causes* (1909), or Isaac M. Rubinow’s *Social Insurance* (1913)) reveals that social issues were much discussed in the early years of the century. Pressure groups such as the American Association for Social Security (founded in 1927), and the

Townsend Movement of the 1930s (which campaigned for federal old age pensions for all at the age of 60) were an attestation of this interest.⁴

Nevertheless, surveying the range of federal and state social policies that developed in the years before the Second World War does indeed reveal a paucity of provision by European standards. Mothers' pensions had been introduced in Illinois and Missouri in 1911, and by 1920 forty states had schemes. These tended to be confined to widows only (viewed as axiomatically 'deserving', since they were husbandless through accident and not choice), and operated many restrictions on eligibility – most notably, the 'suitable home' criterion (which was essentially a judgement on the mother's behaviour).⁵ Minimal support for lone mothers was established, therefore; yet America never developed a true family allowances scheme to benefit all families. Pensions for Civil War veterans existed from 1867, as did other military pensions: by the 1920s, these amounted to the largest pension scheme anywhere in the world. True old age pension schemes existed in a few states, and were very restricted in coverage and benefit value. By 1932, seventeen states had old age pension laws; yet about 73 per cent of state pensioners and 87 per cent of total pension expenditure occurred in only three relatively wealthy states – California, Massachusetts and New York. There had also been some paltry state-level developments in unemployment insurance schemes (by 1935, only five states had such schemes), and in workmen's compensation.

Why was the USA a relative welfare laggard? This question has engendered much debate, and only a summary answer can be provided here. Several interconnected reasons suggest themselves. In the first half of the twentieth century, America had a large agricultural sector located in the Southern states, based upon very low wages or (as in the sharecropping system) almost no wages at all, and concomitantly high levels of hidden, rural poverty. Even a rudimentary social assistance system would have been regarded as a threat to this, acting as a possible disincentive to work. Geographical dispersal and racial divisions also rendered a centrally run, uniform welfare state more problematic – most notably, the sharp contrast between the North and the South (with two very different

⁴ Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (2001), chs 1, 2 and 3.

⁵ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor* (2001), p. 45.

economies and racial structures: even in the 1930s, three-quarters of African Americans lived in the South). Related to this was the fact that America boasted a less well-developed urban social structure and political culture, including lower levels of unionisation among its workers. There was relatively little socialist pressure, apart from certain periods of radical activity (such as immediately after the First World War). Perhaps most vital of all was the fact that an abundance of raw materials and low energy costs facilitated very rapid economic growth, which engendered a cheerful optimism towards free market capitalism. Finally, no European visitor to the USA can fail to be struck by the fact that all the clichés about the ‘frontier mentality’ and ‘rugged individualism’ are true: America is a highly capitalist society, with strongly internalised values of competitive individualism.

The New Deal

The 1929 stock market crash and the 1930s economic recession were traumatic for American society. Soup kitchens, beggars and ‘dustbowl’ poverty were very visible signs of the failure of the US economic system. Between October 1929 and June 1932, the common-stock price index dropped from 260 to 90, average wages and salaries fell to 58 per cent of their 1929 value and the gross income received by farmers was cut by half. The official unemployment figure (certainly an under-estimate) was 12.8 million in 1933, equivalent to 25 per cent of the labour force, and was still 9.7 million (17 per cent) in 1939. As in all such recessions, male breadwinner unemployment was the focus of concern; but it was the families who bore the brunt of hardship.⁶ Although the slump never really dispelled the prevailing view that poverty was the fault of the individual, it certainly revealed the economic causes of poverty more clearly, and tested the American response to social problems based upon faith in free market capitalism, the work ethic, the sanctity of the labour market, the family and community, and so on. By the late 1930s, these traditional American values had been consolidated by Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Franklin D. Roosevelt had assumed the presidency in 1932 on the promise of tackling unemployment, and thus the cornerstone of the New Deal was a package of job-creation measures. The 1933 Federal Emergency

⁶ Linda Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare 1890–1935* (1994), p. 184.

Relief Act made federal aid available to states for emergency unemployment relief schemes, via the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Under programmes such as the Works Progress Administration, the Civil Works Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration, a large number of job-creation schemes were introduced. This workfarist approach was complemented by the 1935 Social Security Act, which established Old Age Insurance, Old Age Assistance, Unemployment Insurance and Aid to Dependent Children.⁷

Essentially, the New Deal consolidated the bifurcated or two-tier income maintenance system that existed in embryo.⁸ The top tier was the middle class, contributory insurance-based Social Security; the second tier was the undeveloped and unloved welfare. This division was to have a profound effect on all subsequent social debates in the USA: as Charles Noble rightly observes, the Act established ‘invidious distinctions between the worthy and unworthy poor that would come back to haunt liberalism’.⁹ For example, from 1970 onwards, social security benefit levels were considerably increased, but the real value of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was cut. Again, it was AFDC that was to cause most concern in the 1970s and 1980s, despite the fact that it cost roughly one-tenth of the total cost of social security. Time and again, one comes across the view that none of the deleterious effects of welfare could be applied to social security: as Adam Wolfson put it, welfare ‘discouraged work and inflicted considerable damage on the family and marriage, while despite its larger expense Social Security can hardly be considered detrimental to seniors’.¹⁰ And when the ‘welfare backlash’ of the 1980s and 1990s finally produced policy results, it was AFDC that was drastically reformed in 1996. Other parts of the New Deal were strongly defended – Social Security by the old age lobby (notably the American Association of Retired Persons), Medicaid by the nursing home business, food stamps by the agricultural lobby, Supplemental

⁷ Its name was changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 1962.

⁸ S. J. Kleinberg, *Widows and Orphans First: The Family Economy and Social Welfare Policy, 1880–1939* (2006), p. 6.

⁹ Charles Noble, *Welfare As We Knew It: A Political History of the American Welfare State* (1997), p. 73.

¹⁰ Adam Wolfson, ‘Conservatives and Neoconservatives’, *The Public Interest*, 154, Winter 2004, p. 43.

Social Insurance by the disability lobby, and so on.¹¹ In contrast to many European societies (and especially Britain in 1934), the USA never developed a comprehensive second tier of means-tested social assistance provision. 'Welfare' thus had different meanings on either side of the Atlantic. In the UK, it was – until recently – associated with 'well-being'; in the USA it was viewed in a highly condemnatory way, denoting social and moral failure. In many ways, the 1960s War on Poverty can be seen as an inadequate and politically compromised attempt to expand that second tier of provision and change its meaning.

For the purposes of this study, it is the origins of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) that are most relevant. As several scholars have observed, a 'maternalist' social policy movement had emerged in early twentieth-century America, resulting in mothers' pensions. In an era in which most married women were not in formal paid employment, the perspective of social reformers was to view women primarily as wives and mothers. Anglo-American, middle-class, maternalist norms were held up as ideals; mothers should not enter the labour market, and should instead care properly for their children in the home.¹² This philosophy permeated ADC, which effectively replaced mothers' pensions under the 1935 Social Security Act.

The Act's highly stratified administrative provisions strongly reinforced existing divisions of gender, race, class, age and locality in American society.¹³ During the passage of the Act, various provisions were introduced that had the effect of excluding African Americans even further. Roosevelt depended on the support of Southern Democrats, and therefore conceded to their demands that agriculture and domestic service be excluded from coverage: of 5.5 million African American workers, 2 million were in agriculture and 1.5 million in domestic service.¹⁴

These restrictions were particularly pronounced in the case of ADC. States were given the freedom to set ADC monetary levels and design their own eligibility criteria (so that their low-wage agricultural sectors

¹¹ David Stoesz, *A Poverty of Imagination: Bootstrap Capitalism, Sequel to Welfare Reform* (2000), p. 16.

¹² Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917–1942* (1995), pp. 27–8, 124–37.

¹³ Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled*, p. 245; Kleinberg, *Widows and Orphans First*, p. 136.

¹⁴ Noble, *Welfare As We Knew It*, p. 71; Gordon, *Pitied but not Entitled*, pp. 5, 275.

would be protected), as well as the right to discriminate racially. There was removed from the Act, at the behest of Southern Congressmen, a crucial clause that required states to provide assistance ‘at least great enough to provide, when added to the income of the family, a reasonable subsistence compatible with decency and health’. States initially paid two-thirds of ADC costs, and were subject only to a federally stipulated maximum ADC payment (and no minimum): the result was that, in 1938, average aid per family varied from \$65.02 per month in Massachusetts to \$8.41 in Arkansas. Devices such as the ‘employable mother’ regulation – widely used in the South – barred mothers of school-age children from receiving aid. Again, in some Southern states (such as Louisiana) no assistance would be available during the cotton-picking season, and informal quotas on the proportion of ethnic minorities aided were often applied. Indeed, some states took years to introduce their own system, Nevada finally doing so as late as 1955 (and then excluding Native Americans).¹⁵ Given the oligarchic nature of Southern power structures, local welfare authorities demanded that they be given control over the distribution of benefits. Even in the most liberal Northern states, ADC was imbued with the same ‘social work’ ethos of behavioural deservingness as mothers’ pensions, and was administered by social workers accordingly. ADC’s residual nature was exacerbated in 1939, when widows of retired workers were reclassified as beneficiaries of old-age insurance, leaving ADC recipients even more likely to be divorced, deserted or single, never-married mothers.¹⁶ In the public mind, the social worth of ADC recipients became even less eligible.

There is much debate among economic historians over the extent to which the reflationary, job-creation measures of the New Deal actually reduced unemployment (compared with the effect of the slow economic growth that was occurring in all capitalist societies over the course of the 1930s). Certainly, in the long run, economic growth did gradually reduce overall levels of poverty, as defined by an absolute poverty line: the 1964 Economic Report to the President by the Council of Economic Advisers showed that the proportion of US families with money incomes below \$3,000 per annum (at 1962 dollars) fell from 32 per cent in 1947 to 20

¹⁵ Kleinberg, *Widows and Orphans First*, pp. 155–8; Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, pp. 47–60.

¹⁶ Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (1994), p. 119.

per cent in 1962. One of the main impulses behind this was the enormous boost to the American economy that took place during the Second World War and sustained a revival in manufacturing until the 1970s. It is also highly relevant to this study to note that talk of an intergenerational ‘underclass’ was stilled by the war.

America in the 1950s

It has become something of an assiduously fostered myth that the American economy and society were doing well in the largely free market conditions of the 1950s, before the 1960s ushered in a disastrous series of interventions by the federal government. Matters have not been helped by the tendency of contemporaries to reinforce this complacency – perhaps understandably, given that the 1950s saw the arrival of full employment and steady economic growth. Some even argued that the new problem of the 1950s was the social anxieties born of prosperity, rather than recession: now that the material needs of the population had largely been met,¹⁷ it was said, politics was based not on class but on ‘status groups’.¹⁸ Henceforth political disagreement would be based upon more whimsical criteria. This ‘back to the future’ romanticisation is central to the conservative counter-revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, and thus needs to be examined in some detail.

In fact, it will be emphasised throughout this book that all the social trends that have so troubled thoughtful Americans since the War on Poverty, were *long-run* trends, predating the 1960s, and even going as far back as the 1920s. To be sure, the 1950s present a superficial image of stability, political quiescence, conformism, gradually growing prosperity and an ‘end of ideology’. Under the benign presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower (1952–60) many social issues (notably civil rights) were ignored or downplayed. However, because of the peculiarities of American politics, Eisenhower did not represent the triumph of conservatism. A solid, conservative phalanx of Republicans and Southern Democrats dominated Washington politics and ensured that little progressive legislation came onto the statute book (deploying devices such as a refusal to vote funds). Between 1938 and 1965, this coalition was

¹⁷ As will be shown in this book, this view wilfully ignored the evidence of high poverty rates and social/racial exclusion among certain minority groups.

¹⁸ Daniel Bell, ‘Interpretations of American Politics’, in Daniel Bell (ed.), *The New American Right* (1955), ch. 1.

able to stop any possible extensions to Roosevelt's New Deal, and render potentially important legislation – such as the 1946 Employment Act, or the 1957 Civil Rights Act – relatively impotent. McCarthyism tended to stifle political radicalism, and the Cold War deepened the underlying geopolitical insecurity that is never far beneath the surface of American culture.

However, in retrospect we can see that the American economy, like all industrialised economies across the Western world, experienced two crucial changes in the post-war years. First, from the 1950s to the early 1970s there were significant technological developments in the labour process and changes in labour market demand, such as to displace workers most vulnerable through lack of skills and education (and often racially disadvantaged); despite the apparent solidity of blue-collar employment, there was a slowly growing group of workers who were becoming economically marginalised. Second, from the early 1970s onwards – initiated by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) oil price rise of 1973 – globalisation began to destroy the vast, protected internal market that had sustained the US economy for decades, while a rapid shift occurred from manufacturing to service industries (in which jobs were more likely to be part time and feminised).

By the early 1960s, there was growing concern over the first of these emerging social trends. It was a concern that was being expressed with increasing urgency both inside government (by bodies such as the Council of Economic Advisers) and outside (in populist social science texts). One particularly apposite example will be explored later – Gunnar Myrdal's *Challenge to Affluence* (1962), which contained one of the first modern usages of the term 'underclass' (actually spelled by Myrdal 'under-class'). For Myrdal (a perceptive and periodic commentator on American society), what was striking about the US economy in the late 1950s and early 1960s was not its untroubled prosperity but its 'sluggish and jerky' development, rising unemployment, relatively slow growth and emergence of new groups in the population who were being displaced by automation and new technology. There had developed

an unprivileged class of unemployed, unemployables, and underemployed who are more and more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions, and its achievements.

This new 'under-class' were 'unorganised and largely remote . . . the least revolutionary proletariat in the world'.¹⁹ It is worth examining these structural problems in greater detail.

Unemployment and Automation

The first area of concern was over rising unemployment and the changing structure of the labour force. In the 1950s, America experienced two mini-recessions (in 1953–54 and 1957–58), the second of which caused some concern. By the late 1950s, doubts were being expressed that Keynesian demand management was sufficient to guarantee steady economic progress. The inexorable decline in unskilled jobs and their replacement by service and white-collar jobs – a feature of all capitalist economies in the second half of the twentieth century – was steadily worsening conditions for those at the bottom of society who could not rise up the occupational structure. To take but one example, among male employees in the metal industries, between 1950 and 1960 there was a 9 per cent decrease in labourers, but a 20 per cent increase in operatives, a 22 per cent increase in craftsmen and a 62 per cent increase in professional, managerial and white-collar employees.²⁰ Disturbingly, the civilian unemployment rate rose over the course of the 1950s, from 2.7 per cent in 1953 to 4.2 per cent in 1957 and 6.7 per cent in 1961. There was a slowing-down in the rate of growth of gross national product (GNP): between 1950 and 1955 it grew by an average of 4.7 per cent per annum; but between 1955 and 1959 the growth averaged only 2.3 per cent per annum. What appeared particularly troubling about the new unemployment was that it was concentrated on particular regions, ethnic minorities and the unskilled. The benefits of automation and technological innovation were being felt by the vast majority of the population, via steadily rising living standards at the aggregate level; at the same time, however, these contrary developments were creating a class of economically dispossessed redundant workers. The response by the Council of Economic Advisors at the end of the 1950s was to devise new Keynesian pump-priming policies, particularly area-targeted reflationary measures.

¹⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, *Challenge to Affluence* (1962), esp. pp. 3–25, 43.

²⁰ Herman P. Miller, *Rich Man, Poor Man* (1964), p. 48.

Poverty

A second problem in the 1950s was the slowing-down in the rate at which poverty was declining, and the obvious emergence of identifiable 'pockets of poverty'. The proportion of families with annual incomes of less than \$3,000 (at constant 1962 dollars) fell from 32 per cent in 1947 to 21 per cent in 1962, but whereas the rate of decline had averaged 1 per cent per annum in 1947–56, it fell to an annual average of 0.4 per cent in 1956–60.²¹ The American poor were, of course, strikingly consumption rich, possessing televisions, cars, electronic goods and household appliances that were the envy of the average Third World citizen. In 1959, even African Americans in Mississippi (the poorest state) had a median income of \$994, above the median for Puerto Rico (\$819). It was perhaps a peculiarly American approach – predicated on the belief that nothing was fundamentally wrong with free market capitalism – to conceptualise the problem of poverty as one of marginalised areas (such as the white rural poor in Appalachia) or population sub-groups within a context of overall prosperity. Tactically, such an emphasis would engender more popular support. On the surface, it did indeed appear that the American economy of the 1950s was magnificently capable of sustaining a more-or-less continual growth rate, steadily distributing the rewards of this to its citizens: real GNP grew by an annual average of 2.9 per cent between 1950 and 1959.²² Standards of living were undoubtedly rising: average personal incomes in 1954 dollars rose from \$3,343 in 1936, to \$5,150 in 1946 and \$6,193 in 1960.

Protection against poverty was improved by a steady, if agonisingly slow, expansion in value and coverage of both Social Security and welfare. The amount of Old Age, Survivors and Disability Benefits (OASDI) paid in any one year increased in coverage from 1.3 million in 1945 to 14.8 million in 1960, although it was not until the 1970s that old age benefits reached anything like reasonable levels. ADC similarly was hidebound by restrictions. These had been put in place in 1935 and created many obstacles in the way of claimants, particularly the 'suitable home' test. Officials who administered the scheme were imbued with the

²¹ Herman P. Miller, 'Changes in the Number and Composition of the Poor', in Margaret S. Gordon (ed.), *Poverty in America* (1965), p. 89.

²² Harold G. Vatter, *The U.S. Economy in the 1950s: An Economic History* (1963), pp. 1–7.

prevailing social work ideology that the poorest were a 'problem group'. James T. Patterson has vividly illustrated this with regard to ADC regulations in New York in 1960. A family of four would be permitted to rent a five-room flat, with very austere provision of furniture and fixtures, linoleum (rather than rugs) on the floor, a radio that could only be played for an hour per day, no television, a stipulated number of electric lights, and so on.²³ Welfare mothers tend to remain hidden from history, but there are some contemporary accounts that reveal what it was like to go through the humiliations of claiming.²⁴ It is important to remember that the trebling of AFDC claims that occurred in the 1960s (and became the basis for conservative concerns over the 'welfare explosion') was caused by long-overdue relaxations of these excessively strict eligibility criteria.

Race

The third area of growing concern in the 1950s was that of racial disadvantage. The stratification of American society by race and class was reflected in sharply differentiated labour market outcomes, some of which were actually worsening. African Americans tended to occupy low-grade jobs: the proportion of black males who were unskilled or service workers only fell from 56 per cent in 1940 to 52 per cent in 1959, and in 1960 African Americans, although constituting only 8.4 per cent of the total male workforce, were 44.7 per cent of private household workers, 37.2 per cent of janitors, 33.3 per cent of laundry and dry cleaning workers and 24.9 per cent of non-farm labourers, but only 2.5 per cent of professional and technical workers. Black women made up 11.6 per cent of the female labour force in 1960; however, they were 53.4 per cent of private household workers (i.e. maids), 35.9 per cent of laundry and dry cleaning workers and 25.0 per cent of charwomen, but only 6.4 per cent of professional and technical workers.²⁵ By the end of the 1950s, black/white income and unemployment differentials had actually worsened. Thus in 1949 the black/white median male income ratio was 52.5 per cent, but by 1959 it was 51.9 per cent (real incomes for African Americans rose threefold on average over that time). Income differentials were, of course, much more pronounced in the South:

²³ James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty 1900–1994* (1994 edn), pp. 86–7.

²⁴ For example, Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road* (1990), pp. 321–4.

²⁵ Miller, *Rich Man*, pp. 93–4, 96.

hence in 1959, whereas the average black worker's income was 70 per cent of the white worker's in New York State, and 69 per cent in Massachusetts, in Mississippi it was only 32 per cent.²⁶ In 1940, the black unemployment rate was 20 per cent higher than the white; by 1963 it was 112 per cent higher.²⁷ Significantly, black women were experiencing relative improvements: for example, in New York State in 1960, black men on average earned 70 per cent of the earnings of white men, but black women earned 93 per cent of white women's average earnings.²⁸ (Of course, one has to bear in mind that at this time white women who worked tended to be concentrated in lower-paying jobs.) All in all, many in the African American community found themselves slipping behind in an economy that was steadily shedding its unskilled workers and experiencing a growth in managerial, service and white-collar sectors. At the same time, their relative educational position was improving. When experienced in the context of deep-seated racism, this was a potent recipe for alienation and social discontent.

Before 1900, 80 per cent of African Americans lived in the rural South. However, from the 1930s the 'great migration' of sharecroppers northwards intensified. Roosevelt's New Deal had contributed to this, by giving subsidies to farmers and thereby encouraging them to replace workers with technology. This had an adverse effect not only on those African Americans – both male and female – who were farm workers but also on those who were domestic servants: as other workers moved down the labour market in search of jobs, they tended to be displaced.²⁹ Between 1940 and 1969, the number of farms in the South decreased by 50 per cent, but those operated by non-whites decreased sevenfold (from 723,000 to 104,000). The agricultural production that remained was more technology intensive and efficient, with fewer workers. This had a profound effect on the employment prospects of young African American males.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷ Robin Marris and Martin Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States* (1968), p. 11.

²⁸ Alan B. Batchelder, 'Decline in the Relative Income of Negro Men', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, LXXVIII, 4, Nov. 1964, pp. 525–48; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City* (1964 edn), p. 30.

²⁹ Kleinberg, *Widows and Orphans First*, pp. 140–42.

Connected with this was a social trend that began to emerge in the 1950s and was critical to the subsequent ‘underclass’ debate. For the first half of the twentieth century, the African American marriage rate had been high. Indeed, it had been higher than that of whites, indicating – contrary to what neoliberals were to argue later – that marriage was both an economic necessity and a cultural norm in the African American community. In 1920, for example, 66.3 per cent of black males aged 15+ were married or widowed, and 74.4 per cent of females; the equivalent proportions for whites were 53.7 per cent and 71.4 per cent. However, from 1950 this black ever-married percentage began to decline, until by the 1980s it was well below that of whites.³⁰ This coincided with the ‘black youth employment crisis’ that began to become apparent in the early 1950s.

The northwards migration also resulted in increasing ‘ghettoisation’ in Northern cities. African Americans formed only 2 per cent of New York City’s population in 1910 (90,000 individuals), but 14 per cent (1.088 million individuals) in 1960. In 1960, half the entire non-white population of New York City above the age of 20 had come from the South. In other cities, the proportions were even higher: 29 per cent in Detroit and 54 per cent in Washington DC. The racism encountered by black people in the North may have been less violent, but it was still very strong – the euphemism ‘institutionalised racism’ covering a multitude of discriminations in education, employment and everyday social life. In the Northern cities, black despair was simply different to what it had been in the South. Ghetto life offered the ambiguous benefits of shared misery – the support and solidarity of neighbours in a similar position, and therefore restricted reference group comparisons – but it also resulted in a concentration of social problems. The extent of this residential segregation was such that it was not uncommon, by the end of the century, for a black youth to grow up in a Northern inner-city ghetto and never see a white person. However, increasing spatial concentration and urbanisation of black culture expanded the politicised, black middle class. It resulted in the emergence of a cadre of political leaders and intellectuals who were more based in the black community and less integrationist in outlook. In Northern cities, voter registration was much higher than in the South (where, in some areas, it hardly existed, owing to the many formal

³⁰ Erol R. Ricketts, ‘The Origin of Black Female-Headed Families’, *Focus*, 12, 1, 1989, pp. 32–6.

and informal restrictions that were in place). An interesting outcome of this was that, from the 1950s onwards, the Democratic Party made strenuous efforts to woo Northern black voters. Until the 1970s, the Northern urban economies were able to absorb this labour influx and provide jobs, but from the 1970s they began to become overcrowded (worsened by the large number of baby boomers in search of jobs), and then their economic bases effectively collapsed with the decline in blue-collar employment. Exacerbated by the out-migration of the black middle class, ghetto poverty became more visible and threatening.

Civil Rights

America's distinctive form of liberal capitalism has given rise to several civil rights movements, based upon age, gender, disability and race. Of these, it is the struggle for racial equality that is most relevant to this study. By the 1950s, there was a long tradition of political activism by African Americans. Most notably, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in 1909 and conducted much lobbying, public education campaigns and legal challenges in the subsequent decades. For example, it tried to have African Americans included in the 1935 Social Security Act, it was instrumental in the 1946 *Morgan v. Victoria* Supreme Court decision (which prohibited segregated seating on interstate buses) and it engineered the famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that overturned the 1896 'separate but equal' doctrine. Another leading organisation was the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded in 1942 by James Farmer. There were numerous black political intellectuals (such as Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey and Ralph Bunche), writers, artists, musicians, and so on. Black activism was high during and after the Second World War, spurred partly by anger at segregation in the armed forces and in the distribution of jobs in the booming wartime industries. It was in this peculiarly radical political atmosphere of wartime that there was published a landmark study in American race relations – Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). Thus by the time of Martin Luther King's civil rights movement in the 1950s, America was 'on the threshold of a long-deferred confrontation with its racial history'.³¹

³¹ Otis L. Graham, *Toward a Planned Society: From Roosevelt to Nixon* (1976), p. 127.

We can see, therefore, that a number of key forces internal to American society were at work to disrupt the apparent complacency of the 1950s. One external event is often seen as critical. On 4 October 1957, the Soviet Union launched its Sputnik and caused consternation among American political leaders. Four years later, in April 1961, the Soviets succeeded in putting the first man into space. Hitherto, America had been thought to be winning the Cold War convincingly, leading the Soviet Union in the arms race and maintaining its effortless superiority in military technology. This was substantially correct – contemporary public estimates of Russia's nuclear strength were grossly exaggerated – but Sputnik seemed to change that. The fact that America's enemy appeared to have the potential to dominate in space sent shockwaves through the politico-military establishment, and led to a national debate on America's educational standards. In response, the Eisenhower administration introduced the 1958 National Defense Education Act, which provided federal funds for the financing of higher education and the strengthening of science, mathematics and foreign language teaching in schools.³² Between 1957 and 1964, total federal, state and local education spending doubled.³³

The Nature of American Conservatism in the 1950s

Any European observer surveying the American political landscape of the 1950s would have been struck by its ideological narrowness. Liberalism predominated – but a cautious liberalism that envisaged only a limited role for the state and did not seriously challenge the distribution of wealth and private property. Roosevelt's New Deal enjoyed support from a coalition of progressives, but there were many who regarded it as 'socialistic', extending too far the powers of the federal government and contrary to America's traditions of individualism and self-help – even though the New Deal was in reality cautious, racially exclusive and a far-sighted liberal strategy for preserving a broadly free market capitalism. What is clear is that American society in the 1950s was one emphatically *not* suited to a strong, explicitly conservative presence. The American Revolution had been in part a revolt against the quasi-feudal

³² Ralph W. Tyler, 'The Federal Role in Education', in Eli Ginzberg and Robert M. Solow (eds), *The Great Society: Lessons for the Future* (1974), pp. 166–7.

³³ J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (1990 edn), p. 352.

and monarchical political structure of the colonial mother country. Apart from the small plantocracy of the Deep South, America lacked both a landed aristocracy and a rural peasantry; hence there did not exist the associated traditions of *noblesse oblige*.³⁴ Nor did there exist the other two core institutions of European conservatism – a monarchy and an established Church. The Republican Party emphatically did *not* represent institutionalised conservatism; it was more a broad coalition of diverse views, with many anomalies. For example, there were the Southern Dixiecrats, whose loyalty to the Democratic Party originated in a Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, abolishing slavery. As has often been pointed out, American conservatism was really a branch of liberalism.

At the same time, America possessed other factors that consolidated political liberalism. The class structure was more fluid than in most European societies, and this was heightened by geographical mobility as land to the west was opened up. There was an abundant supply of cheap land, energy, minerals and raw materials, all of which made for low production costs. For example, once the railroads were built, American prairie wheat could be grown in conditions that European arable farmers could only dream of, transported cheaply to Britain, and then sold at prices that undercut British wheat growers. Labour shortages forced employers to innovate technologically, to their long-run economic benefit. These and other factors meant that economic growth was thus relatively rapid, with a high rate of capital accumulation.

For all these reasons, therefore, American conservatism was in the doldrums in the 1950s. Its emphasis on traditionalism and deference seemed wholly out of place in 1950s America, infused as it was by the belief that Keynesian economics and political liberalism could deliver full employment and steady economic growth. Its opposition to the New Deal seemed anachronistic. Its power base in American electoral geography was small. It would also be fair to say that US conservatism lacked intellectual respectability, with only a small number of active supporters among the intelligentsia and few recognised centres of conservative activity (notably, the University of Chicago). There were some still, small voices against economic development, greater levelling down and what was seen as the decline of reason, but they were a small minority.

³⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (1996), pp. 13, 31.

One of the most interesting was Richard Weaver, who protested against 'equalitarianism' and socialism:

No society can rightly offer less than equality before the law; but there can be no equality of condition between youth and age or between the sexes; there cannot be equality even between friends. The rule is that each shall act where he is strong; the assignment of identical roles produces first confusion and then alienation.³⁵

However, the Republican presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower was cautious and moderate, never espousing strongly conservative policies nor redefining conservatism: as one critical commentator observed in 1955, his administration had 'obviously failed to evoke a world-minded, responsible American conservatism'.³⁶ For example, Eisenhower kept the New Deal intact (although he conspicuously did not expand it) and in January 1961, in his farewell address, he famously uttered a valedictory warning about the 'military industrial complex' coming to dominate American political life. It is, of course, a peculiarity of American politics that the two main political parties have never represented a polarisation between 'conservative' and 'liberal' ideology. There is substantial cross-over between each: for example, the prominent Republican Nelson Rockefeller epitomised the liberal 'Eastern establishment' that existed in cities like New York; by contrast, the Southern Democrats (the 'Dixiecrats') were much more right-wing on issues such as civil rights. Later were to emerge even odder sub-groups like the 'Reagan Democrats'. As will be shown, the backbone of the neoliberal movement of the 1970s and 1980s was provided by individuals who were ex-leftists but who were undergoing a shift to the political right.

Perhaps the only source of sustenance for American conservatism in the 1950s was the virulent anti-communism that permeated American society, a product of the Cold War. America and the Soviet Union had of course emerged from the Second World War as the two great super-powers, and engaged in an often-tense rivalry over global markets and sources of raw materials. That issue apart, American conservatism was divided, weak and lacking a strong power base. Its complaints that the

³⁵ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), p. 42. See also Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (1964).

³⁶ Peter Viereck, 'The Revolt against the Elite', in Bell, *New American Right*, p. 108.

USA had experienced a series of political humiliations in the 1950s – Hungary, the rise of Fidel Castro, the Russian Sputnik – went ignored. It was dominated by a small group of individuals perhaps better known for their marginality and eccentricity than influence on Washington political culture – figures like Russell Kirk, Richard Weaver and William F. Buckley Jr. – often called the ‘paleoconservatives’. In 1959, Morton Auerbach, in his authoritative study, *The Conservative Illusion*, dismissed conservatism as ‘an illusion which has never been and never will be able to translate its ideals into reality’.³⁷ Yet a mere ten years later Kevin Phillips could declare confidently that ‘the new popular majority is white and conservative’.³⁸ What happened in those crucial ten years to the American political landscape is, surprisingly, contrary to the accepted picture of the 1960s in America as a radical decade. In order to understand the answer, it is important briefly to separate apart the different strands of conservatism that then existed.

Varieties of Conservatism

All political ideologies are complex, fractioned and contradictory, and American conservatism is no exception. There have always been many different strands to it and this analysis will therefore attempt to construct a broad typology that will be useful for a later analysis of policy differences.

First, there is what is often termed ‘dispositional’ conservatism – nostalgic, traditionalist, steeped in history, hierarchical, deferential, unspecific, often described as an attitude of mind rather than a clear philosophy, and frequently seen as stemming from Edmund Burke (particularly, Burke’s reaction to the French Revolution). A key ingredient has always been the defence of private property, and one way in which European conservatism responded to the socialist threat from the late nineteenth century onwards was to concede to the working class majority some access to a small share of private property, via owning their own homes (purchased, of course, with long-term mortgages that ultimately benefitted the financial services industry). Dispositional conservatism adopts an attitude of healthy scepticism towards utopian grand projects, such as Marxism, or a blind faith in free markets, and instead seeks to

³⁷ Morton Auerbach, *The Conservative Illusion* (1959), p. 2.

³⁸ Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (1969), p. 31.

conserve established social institutions (such as the family and small communities). ‘Conservatism is as much an attitude of mind as the doctrine of a political party’, is Robert Pinker’s interesting verdict.³⁹ Its view of human nature is essentially pessimistic – man after the Fall. However, it frequently asserts Christian values, explicitly or implicitly, and regards organised religion as an essential building-block of a stable society. It tends to be paternalist, accepting the doctrine of *noblesse oblige*, in that it believes (unlike market liberalism) that the state can and should be used to intervene if necessary to preserve social stability.⁴⁰ A major problem is the fact that it is so loosely defined: if true conservatism is an attitude of mind, rather than a clear set of principles, then there is no means of judging it and arguably there can be no coherent programme of action.⁴¹ In his famous book *Conservatism* (1912), Lord Hugh Cecil offered a classic definition of this position:

Natural conservatism is a tendency of the human mind. It is a disposition averse from change; and it springs partly from a distrust of the unknown and a corresponding reliance on experience rather than on theoretic reasoning; partly from a faculty in men to adapt themselves to their surroundings so that what is familiar merely because of its familiarity becomes more acceptable or more tolerable than what is unfamiliar. Distrust of the unknown, and preference for experience over theory, are deeply seated in almost all minds.⁴²

Perhaps the most intriguing and enigmatic personification of dispositional conservatism was the academic philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973). Strauss was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany in the 1930s who eventually ended up teaching at the University of Chicago and appears to have had an enormously powerful, charismatic influence on many subsequent neoliberals (for example, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Bork, William Kristol and Clarence Thomas). Arguably, Strauss’s obscurantism and his tendency to attract a small band of faithful followers have given his repu-

³⁹ Robert Pinker, ‘The Conservative Tradition of Social Welfare’, in Pete Alcock, Angus Erskine and Margaret May (eds), *The Student’s Companion to Social Policy* (2003), p. 64.

⁴⁰ Charles W. Dunn and J. David Woodard, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (1996); W. H. Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition, Vol. 2: The Ideological Heritage* (1983), pp. 189–91.

⁴¹ Bruce Pilbeam, *Conservatism in Crisis? Anglo-American Conservative Ideology after the Cold War* (2009), p. 8.

⁴² Lord Hugh Cecil, *Conservatism* (1933 edn), p. 9.

tation an undeserved boost.⁴³ From what he had witnessed with the rise of fascism, he concluded that conservatism needed a set of moral absolutes and a rejection of moral relativism. He viewed 1960s social liberalism as analogous to the corrupt, decadent and hedonistic culture of the Weimar Republic in Germany – a culture that had proved itself spectacularly unable to resist the barbarity of Nazism. Liberal modernity in the USA was creating a fundamentally corrupt society characterised by excessive tolerance. Fascism in Germany was, for Strauss, a political movement unrestrained by tradition and morality. Modern liberalism was incapable of opposing fascism, and therefore a more robust philosophy was needed. The answer to preserving civilisation was a return to the ancient truths of the founding fathers of philosophy, such as Plato. Liberalism was too full of moral relativities, and lacked the moral absolutes necessary to guide America through the second half of the twentieth century.⁴⁴ As has often been pointed out, a fascinating cultural icon of the times is the film *The Pawnbroker* (1964), in which an ageing Jewish owner of a pawn shop and a survivor of the Holocaust (played by Rod Steiger) attempts to exist as best he can in the midst of mounting chaos all around him. This kind of critique, so strongly tinged with nostalgia for an imagined past, was absolutely central to many conservative verdicts on the war on poverty. Even the most hard-headed neoliberal was guilty of portraying the 1950s as a time of perfection – as in Charles Murray's wistful longing for the small-town Iowa of the 1950s. One is reminded of Shadia Drury's verdict that neoconservatism was 'intoxicated with its own self-admiration'.⁴⁵

From today's vantage point, it seems strange when one considers the commodification of hedonism that has taken place in the last 35 years under a broadly neoliberal culture, particularly the way that childhood has been sexualised and so much private behaviour thrown open to public scrutiny. Again, the marginalisation of questions of gender equality in 1970s and 1980s conservatism needs to be explained, as do the cross-national similarities in so many post-war social trends – for example, the decline in the rate of marriage – which demonstrate that these great social changes were caused by structural forces common to all industrialised societies, rather than by free human choices. One wonders how Strauss and his followers would view the rampant hedonism,

⁴³ Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (1993), ch. 3.

⁴⁴ Shadia B. Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997), chs 1 and 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

self-absorption and materialism of today's youth: no doubt they would see it as a consequence of liberalism rather than the old-style conservatism that they advocated.

Closely related to the dispositional variety was another backward-looking strand, 'paleoconservatism', also idealising a mythical rural past of small communities, continuity, simple living, neighbourliness, and so on. Russell Kirk (1918–94) is perhaps its most intriguing personification. Although taken up and hailed as a hero by the 1980s neoliberals, Kirk's political position was at odds with theirs in key areas and his views are difficult to categorise. His was a brand of conservatism that was essentially intuitive; he favoured an isolationist foreign policy (for example, opposing the first Gulf War), and had great reservations about America's attempts to spread its own brand of pro-capitalist democracy and human rights across the globe. His world view was one of rural romanticism, yearning for a pre-industrial, agrarian past of small communities and limited central government. Distrustful of reason and rationality, preferring intuition and imagination (in contrast to many neoliberals' love of rational choice theory), he was a critic of the new urban capitalism of the twentieth century, fearing – perhaps correctly, as it turned out – that its emphasis on materialism and consumption could only lead to growing alienation and unhappiness. He was suspicious of urbanisation in particular and technological progress in general – in a memorable phrase, he likened motor cars to 'mechanical Jacobins' – and led a modest lifestyle, in contrast to many of the neoliberals: Kirk's own reflective and reclusive existence, hidden away in Mecosta, Michigan, was in sharp contrast to the intellectual truculence, publicity-seeking and lavish lifestyles of the later neoliberals who inhabited the New York/Washington corridor. Kirk therefore personified all the weaknesses of 1950s paleoconservatism: the refusal to construct a clear programme of action, the ambiguity of his views and, most of all, a romanticisation of the past that meant he had nothing to offer on looming issues like civil rights, urban decay and the culture wars of the 1960s.⁴⁶ Dispositional conservatism most certainly did not offer a coherent and consistent response to 1960s radicalism. Its envisaged pace of social change was slow and incremental, like the pre-industrial societies it fetishised, and therefore it had no urgent programme of action to deal with America's manifest

⁴⁶ W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (2004); Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (2007).

economic problems in the second half of the twentieth century and the rapidity of social and economic change.⁴⁷ Again, its global isolationism offered no prescriptions on how to enhance America's status as the world's number one military and economic superpower.

In the USA, this strand of inexplicit, intuitive conservatism dominated in the 1950s. Hence for William F. Buckley Jr., conservatism was 'a reaction against the twentieth century'; Buckley's celebrated *National Review* boasted that it 'stands athwart history, yelling "stop"'.⁴⁸ As a result, Buckley was instinctively against the Keynesian consensus of the 1950s.⁴⁹ However, the problem with this avowedly unideological strand of dispositional conservatism is that it tends to be merely reactive, uncreative and somewhat unintellectual – responding to events and seeking to conserve, rather than offering an effective programme of action. Indeed, some, like Hayek, even viewed it as a form of unprincipled pragmatism.⁵⁰ And as the USA began to run into serious social and economic problems from the 1950s onwards, it was not enough just to blame political liberalism. As will be discussed later in this book, some 5 million African Americans migrated northwards from the Deep South between 1910 and 1960, placing great strains on the economies of Northern cities and changing the political structure of America. The Democratic Party faced the new challenge of wooing the Northern urban minority vote: this was one of several impulses behind the 1960s War on Poverty. But American conservatism also faced other challenges: most notably, the 'great migration' eroded the quasi-feudal power structure of Southern society and required a new, modernised form of conservatism that would offer a pro-capitalist diagnosis of these urgent economic and social problems, would provide conservative remedies and would restore the authority of the Northern urban economic elite.

In addition, American conservatism had to deal with another problem – that of technological modernisation and growing affluence for the majority. This exposed a basic dilemma in conservatism, one that Daniel Bell called 'the cultural contradictions of capitalism':⁵¹ how should one

⁴⁷ David Burner and Thomas R. West, *Column Right: Conservative Journalists in the Service of Nationalism* (1988), p. 7.

⁴⁸ Wolfson, 'Conservatives and Neoconservatives', p. 36.

⁴⁹ For an account, see William F. Buckley, Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic Freedom'* (1951).

⁵⁰ Pilbeam, *Conservatism in Crisis?*, pp. 8, 16.

⁵¹ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976).

let one's avarice run free in the market, but keep it restrained in one's private world? Arguably, maximising capitalism's potential required its participants to be ruthless, greedy and selfish; yet they were supposed to act in exactly the opposite way when with their families and loved ones. The 'ravenous appetites of profit-seekers' had to exist alongside the 'morality of self-controlled civic virtue'.⁵² Again, how should society promote an authoritarian morality that would preserve social order and class stratification, yet accommodate the trend towards hedonistic individualism that comes with technological advances, such as the contraceptive pill? Rising living standards meant more access to consumer goods and, consequently, identities based upon consumption rather than class position. To resolve this dilemma, a new kind of conservatism was needed. Nevertheless, the dilemma remains unresolved.

Arguably, a major reason for the low esteem in which 1950s conservatism was held was that it was too closely associated with what Richard Hofstadter called 'the paranoid style in American politics' – racist, white supremacist organisations like the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, survivalist groups, right-wing militia, acolytes of Ayn Rand, and so on. The trouble is that anti-communist paranoia has always lingered under the surface of US politics. The statistic that some 600 American academics were fired from their posts and many more were cowed into silence as a result of the McCarthy era witch-hunts in the 1950s is a tribute to this.⁵³

Conclusion

In the 1950s, conservatism in the USA had no specific meaning, but by the 1960s and 1970s this was changing and a new breed of neoliberals was emerging. The actual term applied at this point in history was 'neoconservatism', which appears to have been coined by Michael Harrington in the mid-1960s to describe the growing band of ex-liberals (and ex-communists) disillusioned with what they saw as disturbing new trends in American society.⁵⁴ Above all else, they rejected the isolationism of the paleoconservatives and argued that America should play a leading role in the world. In a revealing phrase, Irving Kristol once

⁵² Burner and West, *Column Right*, p. 2.

⁵³ Oakley, *God's Country*, p. 72.

⁵⁴ Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, p. 193.

declared that neoconservatism was ‘resolutely free of nostalgia’.⁵⁵ in other words, it should be a forward-looking ideology with a clear agenda for the revitalisation of American capitalism – unlike dispositional conservatism, which, by comparison, offered much nostalgia but little hope. By the 1980s and 1990s, its name had changed and its time had arrived.

⁵⁵ C. Bradley Thomson, with Yaron Brook, *Neoconservatism: An Obituary* (2010), p. 175.