

# A WHITE MEN'S AGONY: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE REAGAN COALITION THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF AMERICAN SCHOLARS (1940-2016)

## A AGONIA DO HOMEM BRANCO: A ASCENSÃO E QUEDA DA COALIZÃO REAGAN ATRAVÉS DA PERSPECTIVA DOS INTELLECTUAIS NORTE-AMERICANOS (1940-2016)

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**Abstract:** The American Conservative movement saw a huge rise following Reagan's ascent to the presidency. The Reagan Coalition managed to make the Republican Party the dominating force for almost thirty years, empowering certain social groups that supported its rise since its beginning, during the New Deal era. Following deep economic and social changes seen in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Barack Obama managed to craft a new political coalition, one that managed to end the Republican dominance. As the Democrats were able to craft a new coalition, the answer came in the rise of an authoritarian/populist right embodied by Donald Trump and the Tea Party. The goal of this essay is to understand this political process through the lens of American scholars, focusing on their analysis of how the rise and fall of the Reagan Revolution shaped the troubled political scenario seen in America today.

**Keywords:** Conservatism; Reagan; Republicans; Tea Party.

**Resumo:** O movimento conservador norte-americano teve um momento de domínio da vida política norte-americana durante os anos de Reagan na presidência. A intensidade e organização da Coalizão Reagan permitiram ao Partido Republicano o controle político dos Estados Unidos por trinta anos, o que resultou no predomínio de certos grupos sociais, ligados ao segmento WASP (Branco, Anglo-Saxão e protestante) o controle da agenda social da nação. Após profundas mudanças políticas, econômicas e sociais, A Coalizão Reagan enfrentou um momento de contestação e declínio no século 21, o que culminou com a vitória de Barack Obama em 2008. O surgimento de uma nova coalizão mais à esquerda, trouxe uma forte reação dos grupos ligados ao segmento WASP, tendo como resultado o surgimento do Tea Party e a candidatura de Donald Trump. Dessa forma, o objetivo do artigo visa analisar como que intelectuais norte-americanos perceberam e analisaram o processo de formação e implosão da Coalizão Reagan, e suas consequências para o conservadorismo nos Estados Unidos.

**Palavras-chave:** Conservadorismo; Reagan; Republicanos; Tea Party.

*Firing the Revolution: the origins and consolidation of the Reagan Coalition.*

During one of the many Republican primary debates during the 2012 presidential elections, Ronald Reagan was either mentioned or quoted more than thirty times during the first half hour of the debate. Taking into consideration that Reagan has left office twenty-five years ago, it is certainly a number that says a lot about the importance of the "Reagan Revolution", one that was able to end the economic troubles

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of the 1970s at a huge social cost and the increase of economic inequality. Its importance went far beyond Reagan's presidency and its impact certainly had global repercussions. Although, it may seem easy to tell that story only focusing on the charismatic Reagan and forgetting how the factors that brought him to power have more to do with a broader alliance. It took decades for this alliance to get its actual form and shape and it found supporters from different regions and with the most diverse political, social and cultural motivations. The mistake is to think that the "Reagan Revolution" it is only about Reagan, when it is clearly not the case. It is about the revival of the Conservative movement in America and how conservatives had to put a challenge to the liberals after the rise of the New Deal. The goal here is to explain the ideological origins of this turn to the right through the perspective of American intellectuals from the humanities, how Reagan became a part of it and which the implications for America were.

In order to understand the rise of the New Right and how it culminated in the "Reagan Revolution" it is important to go back to the 1930s, with the coming of Franklin Roosevelt and his innovative policies. The historian Jeremy Adelman called Argentina of the early twentieth century "A republic of capital", certainly such a title could also be applied to America during the same period. With a huge flux of European immigrants and British capital, capitalism in the United States developed with an impressive rate after 1865. Soon, the United States became its own financial master and also became an industrial powerhouse, able to compete with the European powers. The elites of the Gilded Age soon pointed out to the wonders of the free market capitalism that was able to elevate a former British colony to the post of one of the most important nations in the world. For them, America worked perfectly and *lasses-faire* became the mantra of the economic elites.<sup>1</sup>

When social pressure for inclusion became too much, the Progressives were able to deliver more social inclusion without changing the essentials in the wheel of fortune. Although they fought the trusts and expanded federal regulation, the American capitalism was still very opened to work and capital and also had lower rates of taxation when compared to continental European countries. Even after the start of the Great Depression, the attempts to recovery the economy were focused on free-market initiatives. Their view was that crisis always come and go, they have been a part of the capitalist system since its birth. Therefore, the best thing that the United States

government could do was to keep its hands off and let the entrepreneurial power of the individual to restore the nation to its former economic prowess.

In that sense, the millions of Americans who were unemployed and starving could not wait for the market get back on track again, and demanded government action. The progressive sector of the American elite feared that social chaos might have started if they did not act soon. And the Roosevelt ticket in 1932 seemed to be the right answer to that. When Roosevelt got into power and started applying a new economic corollary that challenged some of the most sacred tenants of the free-market, the conservative elites felt encroached by this new coalition lead by Roosevelt. Soon, they felt the need to reorganize the counter-attack, and that is the story told by Kim Phillips-Fein and Lisa McGirr about the rebirth of the Conservative movement in America. As they both argued, the rise of Ronald Reagan was just the final act of a play that started fifty years before. Since the mid-1930s, the conservatives were already organizing themselves to go back to power. The contribution of Fein and McGirr to the historiography is really precious in many ways. First, they prove how the New Deal was far from being unanimous, even before the legendary Roosevelt quarrels with the Judiciary. In second, both scholars demonstrated how the American conservatives were impressively organized by drawing brainpower from Europe in order to spread new ideas in America. And third, new influential think-tanks and “societies” were led by powerful industrial barons such as DuPont and over the next decades they were instrumental in forging a new Conservative ideology over the next decades.<sup>ii</sup>

The main complaint of those conservative elites was that the New Deal was empowering the unions, curtailing free initiative and obstructing business with red tape. But, according to Fein and McGirr they did not see why the government had to intervene so deeply in the economy. For them, Keynesianism could only lead to more government intervention, and by doing that the individual lost its incentive to be entrepreneurial, since everything came from the State. And from the moment that people had to rely more on the State than in them, the road to serfdom was paved and opened. It was more than an economic argument, it was a moral and philosophical argument with deep cultural roots. Fein and McGirr did not mention this a lot, but it was clear that these conservative elites shared the idea that America was solely built on the strength of the pilgrim. The ideal pilgrim was pious and entrepreneurial and was able to master a rough environment. This powerful tale still resounds nowadays and for them this ideal was the backbone of America and the reason for its success, anything that

deviated from that was then labeled un-American, an expression that would be used many times after the 1930s.<sup>iii</sup>

Even in spite of their fierce spirit and impressive organization, the Conservatives were no-match for the New Deal coalition. Perhaps the best statement of that is the fact that Eisenhower, who was a Republican president, governed on a New Deal platform. After staying out of power for so long, many Republicans were ready to accept Keynesian economics and some of the tenants of the New Deal. Others, were still fighting on their corners and held a lot of resentment for Liberals and labor unions. For the Conservative stalwarts, defeating the New Deal was not enough, only wiping them out was the final solution. In spite of the fact they were not winning presidential elections, the Cold War brought a whole set of new opportunities. The most promising field that was explored by the conservatives was the fierce anti-communism from the suburban middle-classes. Communism was characterized as this authoritarian/atheist social experience that challenged the core values of the American society. The Orange County in California, as portrayed by Lisa McGirr was the perfect example of that.<sup>iv</sup>

During the 1950s, the rise of the Sunbelt was a direct response to the rejection of the New Deal policies. As demonstrated by Rick Perlstein in “Nixonland”, important American business were moving to the less unionized and less taxed south and southwest. There, old and new kinds of industries started to prosper, and with them lots of new white suburbs attributed its prosperity to a more opened economic environment than the one they had in the north. This story was perfectly told by Jefferson Cowie in his book “Capital Moves” about how RCA moved from its original base in New Jersey in a relentless quest for cheaper labor and weaker unions. First they moved to Indiana, that seemed to be a safe conservative ground by the early 1950s, but that changed over time. When unions in Indiana started to grow stronger, they moved to Memphis, Tennessee. And when in Tennessee the unions started to blossom, RCA moved to Mexico, leaving behind a trail of unemployed workers with debts, empty factories and destroyed communities. But, perhaps the most important aspect brought by Cowie’s work was the sheer hatred of unions and regulations that a portion of the American business elite had. Being many years in the political wilderness made some of them to become zealots, RCA policies implied more than economic factors, it was also a moral statement. If they could not change Capitalism in their own country, they would move abroad if necessary.<sup>v</sup>

Given that context, it did not take a lot of time to the Sunbelt also become the Bible belt. As demonstrated by McGirr and Pearlstein, the religious rebirth of Protestant America also had to do with the consequences of the New Deal. Wealth and prosperity brought a new sense of values during the early 1960s, where the New Left was advocating for thorough social changes in issues that were dear to conservative Christians, such as family and marriage. The fact that the New Left was often labeled as Communist only made things worse. Orange County was one of the first places where economic classic Liberalism met the Conservative religious movements. This new brand of conservatives such as William Buckley and Irving Kristol would refute the kind of atheist conservatism espoused by Ayn Rand, another Conservative darling from the 1940s and 1950s. In sum, the rise of the Sunbelt and the Bible belt together with the erosion of the New Deal coalition would pay its first political dividends during the 1960s in three different moments: the Barry Goldwater nomination in 1964, Reagan's governorship that started in 1967 and Nixon's victory in 1968.<sup>vi</sup>

*Seizing the Nation: the Reagan Coalition takes form.*

The three main events previously mentioned were extremely important in shaping the future of the Reagan Revolution. Although Goldwater lost, the fact that he was nominated was already a huge victory for the new Conservatism over the Republican establishment of the east coast. Reagan's victory was even more impressive given the fact that Reagan dethroned the popular Democrat governor Pat Brown. Californians and its white suburbs seemed to be in tune with Reagan's call for public order and individual freedom. The American white middle-class felt threatened by a cultural revolution that they could not understand. The Civil Rights protests and the college students strong actions against the Vietnam war did not fit the suburban logic of God and patriotism. In the end, that created an unavoidable chasm in America. And when a good portion of the Democratic Party aligned itself with the more progressive forces, they alienated a good portion of the white middle-class that had been together with the Democrats since the New Deal. That was the beginning of the end for the New Deal coalition, which was made even clearer after Nixon's election in 1968.

Although Nixon won with the full support of the new conservatives, he was not perceived to be one of them. In spite of the fact that Nixon was a fierce anti-communist and also was a politically conservative man, he governed on a Keynesian platform that

did not attack the New Deal at all. There was a fundamental difference between the way Reagan was governing in California and Nixon was ruling the country. That difference becomes clear when the works of Pearlstein and Sean Wilentz are compared. Reagan was governing on a more free-market and anti-union than Nixon. And by doing that, Reagan soon became the new icon of the New right, he seemed to be what they really needed. At this moment, a new historical context was about to rise. The impressive chain of events that was about to happen in the 1970s would be the final piece in the puzzle that put the Reagan Revolution in the White House.<sup>vii</sup>

The first piece of this puzzle is certainly the demise of the Keynesian economic order during the 1970s. The majority of the economists and politicians came to accept that it was the government's role to control supply and demand and also to offer countercyclical measures when things did not work quite well. Temporary government deficits, emphasis on the demand-side of the economy and expansionary monetary policies were the regular corollary for times of recession. When inflation and recession started to gain strength after 1970, those were the standard measures that were adopted. And by the dismay of the economic analysts and scholars, things were actually getting worse. The oil embargo of 1973 not only exposed the American dependence on cheap foreign oil, but also exacerbated other inherent structural flaws of the American economy. What began as the oil crisis soon would create a new expression for the lexicon: stagflation. In classic economic theory, inflation meant that the demand in the economy was larger than the supply, which continuously pushed prices upwards. But now, the demand was actually contracting but inflation still was growing. Massive layoffs and increasing prices burdened the middle-class that was anxious for new answers.<sup>viii</sup>

It was during that moment that the work mainly done by the economists at the University of Chicago started to call attention for them. All those economic societies and think-tanks initiated in the 1930s were on the limbo for a very long time, but they helped to create and train an important generation of economists that were free-market oriented. In order to understand the complexity of this topic and how it became a pivotal piece in the Reagan Revolution, it is important to bring the works of William Greider and Paul Krugman. Both authors have a strong opinion against the conservative economic model that was advocated by Reagan and the so called "Chicago boys". But, their perception and criticism was very important because it allows us to understand more in depth what was being proposed by them at that moment in the economic realm.

First, they argued that the US government was expanding its monetary base in an irresponsible way in order to fuel internal demand and also to cover its budgetary deficits. Since the dollar has been the world's currency for the last sixty years, it was always a temptation to expand the monetary base.

That was exactly what the FED chairman Arthur Burns did, and he simply followed the standard procedure in Keynesian corollary. In second, investment was being so heavily taxed that any incentive to invest did not exist anymore. With low interest rates and high inflation, capital gains were low and the financial system struggled. As direct consequence, there was not what experts called “a healthy environment” for investment. During the 1970s it became more profitable to the American financial powerhouses to explore markets abroad that had higher interest rates. The weakness of the financial sector in America had a direct effect in the real economy.<sup>ix</sup>

These two causes perpetuated a cycle of low economic growth and high inflation, which by its turn brought to the American middle-class an increased sense of insecurity. Krugman and Greider's also were instrumental in demonstrating that the conservative economic camp was divided between two groups. One was the monetarist, inspired by the Chicago Boys that preached that inflation could only be “sucked out” of the system through a painful medicine of higher interest rates, lower monetary base and control of the government's expenditures. The Supply-Side school that had its headquarters in Columbia University believed that the priority was having taxes on capital gains, corporations and fortunes lowered to the possible minimum index. What supply-siders argued for was a totally uncharted territory. Tax reductions were implemented before in American economic history, but nothing at this scale. There was not a single study that proved that lower taxes automatically reverted in more investments in the real economy. Those two camps were at odds all the time with one another, and only Reagan solved the issue. He liked both purposes and wanted to see them implemented. Despite of the fact that Reagan was not an economist, his instincts made him believe that both formulas could be applied at the same time. And that belief unintentionally created Reaganomics.<sup>x</sup>

The final stage of the ascension of Reagan Revolution to the presidency cannot be simply explained by the birth of an anti-Keynesian economic thought. The social turmoil of the 1970s and what I call “The Carter Tale” were the final pieces of the puzzle. As it can be inferred from Bruce Schulman work called “The Seventies”, the

combination of the New Left activists and stagflation created a powerful combination that made the conservative side to join forces and they carried out a strong counter-revolution. The new sexual freedom brought by the 1960s, the anti-American bashing and the chaos of revolts in the cities challenged the entrenched views that conservative groups held about religion, family and nationalism. The “masculine” woman that was fighting for her place in the labor market, the “effeminate” man of the disco music seemed to be the essence of an epoch that lacked a strong moral compass. What Nixon called “The silent majority” had to deal with that on a daily basis inside their once sacred suburbs, at the core of their family life. The breadwinner was demoralized by stagflation and America was being demoralized by the communist forces. Injury was added to insult in their view during the Jimmy Carter presidency. Certainly the hurdles faced by Carter were beyond his grasp, and perhaps no other president would have managed such difficult context. But, for the conservatives he was simply this weak man who did not have the moral strength to stop the economic and moral demise. Strong leadership was needed, and was on that mantra that Reagan ran for the presidency in 1980.<sup>xi</sup>

Reagan’s message exploited to the extreme those differences between him and Carter. The president seemed to embody the Malaise, while Reagan was able to bring back a confident and positive narrative about America. What was really important is that the content of that message was able to reach a constituency that was broader than the hardcore Conservatives. Suddenly Reagan was being able to appeal to suburban New Dealers, creating a whole new voting category called the “Reagan Democrats”. They wanted prosperity, order and preached love for their country. That was how that generation grew up, with a sense of optimism brought by charismatic Democrats such as Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy.

In the end, Reagan managed a feat that put him on equal standing with the two presidents he most admired, Calvin Coolidge and Franklin Roosevelt. Being the winner of two landslides (1980 and 1984) allowed Reagan to carry out a dramatic market-oriented reform by applying monetarist and supply-sider reforms. Those reforms accomplished two of the most cherished goals of the conservative coalition. First, was the destruction of the New Deal coalition which handed them several political defeats over half-century.

The second goal was almost the total destruction of the New Deal economic order. After 1981, free-markets and individual entrepreneurship became fashionable

once again, and Keynesian policies never reached the same level of respectability that they had in America during the 1950s and 1960s. And the long economic boom that lasted from 1984 until 2008 helped to consolidate the belief that Keynesian ideas did not fit the American economy, which saw weakened labor unions and presided over the deindustrialization of the United States.

Perhaps those were the two most important legacies of the Reagan Revolution. But, before assessing that legacy more in depth, it is important to emphasize that there would not be Reagan Revolution without the strong Conservative coalition that started in 1932. That is why those who try to understand Reagan only looking for the 1960s or the 1970s will not get the full picture. Certainly, historians have the vantage point of long duration in order to understand such a complex social phenomenon. Once more, Reagan was not the creator of that movement. He was the spokesperson that they needed, just like he was for General Electric during the 1950s. But, thinking that Reagan was simply a spokesman, a ventriloquist for the conservatives is also to underestimate him. His personal skills, especially his contextual intelligence were able to put together a ragtag set of ideas into a coherent and compelling narrative, which allowed him to create a powerful Conservative coalition that brought back the hegemony to the Republican Party.

Assessing the Reagan Revolution legacy is always a difficult task, but is certainly one that historians must to try. It seems clear that there are two interpretational schools that seemed to have prevailed since the 1980s. One is led by the conservatives that came as close as possible of transforming Reagan on a saint. The other group is composed of Liberal thinkers that have done exactly the opposite. Extremes very often do not help to provide us with a clearer picture of the past. Scholars such as William Greider, Paul Krugman and Judith Stein have argued that the damage done by the Reagan Revolution far surpassed any of its achievements. In some ways they are actually right. The Reagan Revolution used extremely harsh measures to end up with the inflation in the early 1980s. The severe monetary control that was carried out by Paul Volcker since the last year of the Carter administration made its weight felt mainly on the poor and the middle-class. In 1981 and 1982 the American GDP contracted, inflicting pain not only in the American economy, but also in the world economy as well. Greider demonstrated perfectly how the high interest rates that lasted for the most of the Reagan years were a burden for the American middle class. The real income of the lower classes in America have stayed flat since then, its purchase power has been

artificially afloat by abundant credit, cheap goods from abroad and low inflation. Huge gains in the productivity of the American worker have failed to materialize in real income gain, as often happened during the New Deal era.<sup>xii</sup>

Paul Krugman succeeded in demonstrating how some of the main tenants of Reaganomics were actually ludicrous. The concept of the Laffer curve, where less taxation actually would lead to a broader tax base and increased revenues never materialized during the Reagan years. In fact, Reagan had to raise taxes for seven years in a row after the fiscally insane Federal Tax Act of 1981. Although the Conservative argument that excessive taxation represents an incentive against investment, a tax-free America was also a utopia, as the bankruptcy of Orange County and later the state of California have proved. During his eight years in office, Reagan never stood for the kind of fiscal responsibility that he idolized.<sup>xiii</sup>

In fact, since the 1980s, Democratic presidents have been more fiscally responsible than the Republicans, with Bill Clinton being the only one who actually delivered a budgetary surplus from 1999 until 2001.<sup>xiv</sup> There are two impressive feats here that are a legacy of the Reagan Revolution. One is that now were the Democrats that had to govern like the Republicans, certainly a sweet revenge from the New Deal days. And even most striking is the fact that the Reagan Revolution persuaded the American audience that tax cuts, Medicare, strong military and prosperous economy were all possible at the same time. Half-way through the second decade of the twenty-first century this belief seems to be barely scratched, and also is a politically useful tool to tell the American citizens that in the “land of plenty” no hard choices have to be made.

Certainly the middle-class has struggled since the 1970s and the situation did not improve a lot since the 1980s, but the doom and gloom view espoused by Judith Stein doesn't seem to portray the entire truth. Lower inflation certainly represented a huge relief for the poor and the middle-classes. It has been widely known in economics that inflation is a permanent tax on the poor's wages. So, even if the medicine was extremely painful, long-term inflation was not an option neither for the elites nor the people in the United States.<sup>xv</sup>

It seems that over the last decade we have seen new and interesting narratives about the Reagan revolution. Those are narratives that try to consider how that moment was shaped by forces that many times seemed to be beyond the control of the powerful conservative coalition. The rise of the financial sector and its preponderance over

manufacturing were not simply an American phenomenon, but was a global one, as shown by the economic historian Niall Ferguson.<sup>xvi</sup> Interesting reflections on the self-wounds made by the Left and the labor unions are also a part of the work of historians such as Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin.<sup>xvii</sup> Their works help us to remind that the political hegemony was the Liberals to lose, and they lost it by a series of complex factors that would demand many more than the length on an essay to fully explain. Essentially, Kazin and McCartin argued that the Labor Unions became a white-male institution, and by that they ended up endorsing a Conservative ethos, which eventually brought their downfall at the moment where unions lost their legitimacy with minorities workers.<sup>xviii</sup>

A global perspective of the Reagan years and its effect on labor and macroeconomics are certainly another topic that it still has a lot of room for development. The work done by Nelson Lichtenstein about Wal-Mart certainly demonstrated how the free-market emphasis started by the Reagan Revolution created a whole new way of doing business.<sup>xix</sup> This new model based on speed, precision and efficiency certainly brought more stress and uncertainty to the global labor force. Another area that presents itself opened for more in depth analysis is the influence of Reagan Revolution in economic and labor policies in Latin America. Much has been said about this in informal academic debates, but it never materialized in a considerable body of work in the same way that the influence of Reaganomics in Thatcherite Britain has been thoroughly analyzed. And finally, the cultural aspects of the Reagan Revolution such as the idea of how the so called “me decade” affected the political and economic structures of more contemporary history. The Conservative wave that preached the supremacy of the individual ushered a new age not only of individualism, but also of a deep mistrust to anything that slightly resembles a more collective idea of society. The direct result of that are the inchoate political movements that we saw in the Arab Spring during 2011 and we see now in Brazil, Venezuela and Ukraine. In order to understand how we can find a middle-ground between collective action and individual freedom it is important to understand the meaning of the Reagan Revolution, and the task has only just begun.

*Conclusion: Pandora's box – the new American conservatism from Obama to Trump*

The George<sup>xx</sup> W. Bush years in office (2001-2009) seemed to confirm that the Reagan Coalition was still in place. White voters that guaranteed the majority in the

southern United States were still enough to deliver important victories in national and state level elections. The ideological role played by Conservative pundits such as Karl Rove, Bill O' Reilly and Rush Limbaugh was lauded as the pillar where cultural wars were won. Suddenly, the downfall of the Reagan coalition brought by the election of Barack Obama in 2008, changed dramatically the American political landscape.

The failure of the war in Iraq added to the deep instability caused by the Great Recession of 2008 caused the erosion of Reagan style republicanism, which became evident after the major gains made by the Democrats in the 2006 Congressional election. As dissatisfaction with the establishment started to mount up, it opened the opportunity for a candidate portrayed as an outsider to be elected President of the United States. Barack Obama was able to galvanize the power of different social segments, especially based on the political support of women and the ethical minorities. Those were political groups deemed irrelevant in the political world of the 1980s, it was a profound change that the Conservatives failed to realize until Obama's victory was sealed.<sup>xxi</sup>

The reaction of American intellectuals was certainly mixed and portrayed the uncertainty brought by the new reality. Some supporters of Obama expected that a new majority was created and cemented, one that could restore the political strength of the left in the United States. Despite all the optimism that followed Obama's election and his first months in office, it soon became clear that consolidating a new majority and implementing new public policies based on the demands of that coalition would not be an easy task.

It soon became clear that the Conservatives were ready to resist Obama's wave, and with that a new form of Conservatism was set to arise, symbolized by the ascent of the Tea Party. In order to understand how one of the greatest victories for progressive forces in America's history suddenly unleashed an ideological backlash of epic proportions, one that culminated with Donald Trump's nomination as the Republican presidential candidate in 2016, the views of Michael Tesler and Thomas Sugrue are essential perspectives.

Michael Tesler analyzed how what he called Old-Fashioned Racism (OFR) materialized into a political force after Obama's inauguration. According to Tesler, the OFR is nothing more than the belief that African-Americans were biologically inferior to other races, therefore they were unfit to serve in any meaningful public office post. In Tesler's analysis, OFR became a less important actor in American politics right after the

implementation of the Civil Rights Act (1966). Discrimination against African-Americans in politics was justified under different grounds, such as cultural or educational background, than on biological grounds.<sup>xxii</sup>

Since the beginning of the Obama Administration, there has been a substantial increase in OFR hate speech in the American political spectrum. The biological based racial prejudice has returned in full force, mainly fueled by the partisans of the Tea Party. Instead of unleashing a new age of racial tolerance in America, the election of Barack Obama had exactly the opposite effect. Conservatives seemed to be more galvanized than ever by the election of a Black president who had a strong liberal intellectual background. In their sheer hatred of the new president and its agenda, the fringes of the Conservative movement resorted to the old discourse based on OFR, in which seemed to be a useful strategy in galvanizing the opposition.<sup>xxiii</sup>

As the Obama presidency advanced its agenda with the healthcare reform (Obamacare) and the conclusion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the new Tea Party movement seemed to be gaining momentum for the mid-term elections of 2010. The core of the discourse against Obama was mainly based on the idea that the president was not born in the United States, that he was actually born either in Indonesia or in Kenya, therefore he was unfit to be the current President. It is no wonder that this movement was led since its early days by the New York billionaire, Donald Trump. "The Donald", as he is popularly known in America, adroitly seized the Tea Party bandwagon since the first day, especially in adopting the vitriolic rhetoric which was the trademark of the movement.

In the years that followed, the tone of the opposition against the current President only got worse, with the charged led by the Tea Party partisans. In one of the most important political maneuvers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Republican Party decided in 2010 to informally embrace the Tea Party movement under its political umbrella. It was a risky move, as several party senior figures thought, but the bet seemed to be worth the risk. By 2009, influential Republicans feared that the newly formed "Obama Coalition" would make the Democrats the default party for the next decades. Given what they considered a crucial threat to its hold in power and the erosion of the Reagan Coalition, adopting the Tea Party's often authoritarian/racist discourse was seen as the only viable option for political survival in the short term.

The Tea Party movement changed in its nature as well, what started as a typical anti-government movement that stemmed from the Reagan years. Its major claim was

that Obama was trying to “Europeanize” the United States with his “Socialist” agenda, where an expanded State would impose on Americans the burden of heavier taxes and cut the incentives to individual entrepreneurship, which was seen as the backbone of the American economic prowess. By the time of Obama’s reelection campaign, in 2012, the rhetoric turned uglier as the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party became more aggressive against the minorities and foreigners.

As that gospel of hatred started to spread like fire in the American political scene, it was only a matter of time that they would be able to have their own nominee for the Republican presidential ticket. As the mainstream Republicans lost the control of their own party, they had to surrender to Donald Trump’s nomination in 2016 in almost complete disbelief. As Trump feeds the bonfire of hatred even more, there are serious doubts about the future of the Republican Party after the 2016 elections, and how the Republicans will finally be able to poach voters from the Democrats, especially among the minorities they have neglected so far.

As the Election Day looms over the horizon, and the campaigns rhetoric turns even sourer, the question that is present in the minds of several American intellectuals is: how the situation has come up to this point? Perhaps the most elucidating answer comes from the historian Thomas Sugrue, who was able to capture the spirit of the early days of the Obama victory in 2008 and explain how such high hopes were turned into dust in such little time. First, Sugrue pointed out to the fact that tackling racism in America was a task beyond one man only, since it is a social problem deeply rooted in America’s history. Therefore, the Obama’s victory in 2008 was prone to bring even more dissent as the social groups which saw themselves as “losers” in the process were expected to react fiercely.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Another important arguments brought by Sugrue had to do with the reaction of the poorer white population to the rise of what he called the “minority-majority”, and the dismal situation of the African-American community in the United States. As argued by Sugrue, the major American metropolitan areas saw the economic rise of Asians and Latinos over the last twenty years. Together with the highly-educated whites, they reaped the fruits of globalization and the global success of several American conglomerates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For the poorly-educated whites, who were mainly left out of the globalization riches as factories closed and better jobs demanded higher skills than 30 years ago, resentment soared. That resentment sooner or later

would be galvanized into a political movement, which finally happened with the rise of the Tea Party.<sup>xxv</sup>

The issue of the African-American social/economic standing in the American society was expected to have great improvements under the aegis of a black president, but that reality failed to materialize. As Sugrue argued, Obama ran twice not as a “black president”, but he ran as a “post racial president”, which put a different emphasis on his policies. As several black communities were also left out of the wealth generated by globalization, disappointment with general politics grew larger, creating a new racial schism in contemporary America.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The conclusions brought by Sugrue may serve well to bring the final thoughts to this essay. Essentially, Sugrue argued that in many ways the turbulent political process we are seeing now in America was unavoidable. This is a natural reaction of an ethnic/social group, which sees its central spot in American society taken over by the “majorities-minorities”. By 1980, when Reagan was elected President, the country’s population was 80% white, and the majority of the voters were white blue-collar workers. As the “minority-majority” grew up in size and importance over the last thirty years, women and Latinos have become some of the most important constituencies in order to win general elections. Since economics and demographics are on their side, the political rule of the “minority-majority” will become the norm.

The 2016 electoral cycle marks definitely the end of the Reagan Coalition, whose breakup started with Obama’s victory in 2008. As the tectonic plates of American politics move fast, deep social tensions are expected, until the new fault lines have been established. The pressing issues facing the American society are many, but essentially it must focus on defeating the populist-authoritarian charge embodied by Donald Trump. But, the greatest challenge lies in how the American politicians will create efficient policies to share the spoils of globalization with less privileged social groups and how the age of hyper partisan politics will give way to a healthier political environment that may become an economic enabler to the dispossessed.

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## Notes:

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<sup>ii</sup> PHILLIPS-FEIN, Kim. *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade against the New Deal*. New York: W.W. Norton, Pp.4-38. 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Idem.

<sup>iv</sup> Idem.

<sup>v</sup> PERLSTEIN, Rick. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. New York: Scribner, Pp. 310-373 2008.

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<sup>vii</sup> WILENTZ, Sean. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. New York, NY: Harper, 2008. Pp. 410-446.

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- <sup>x</sup> *Idem.*
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- <sup>xviii</sup> *Idem.*
- <sup>xix</sup> LICHTENSTEIN, Nelson. *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business*. New York: Metropolitan Books, Pp. 5-18 2009.
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- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Idem.*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> SUGRUE, Thomas J. *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Pp.56-92. 2010.
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Idem.*
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Idem.*