In *Age of Fracture*, Daniel Rodgers offers an elegant, often eloquent, history of intellectual life in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Primarily interested in the construction of ideas that shaped conceptions of history, society, and responsibility, he analyzes texts from an eclectic array of academic thinkers across the political spectrum. Rodgers argues that in the 1940s and 1950s, social scientists and political philosophers established the terms of the debate on a range of issues concerning the self and society, obligations and justice, morality and destiny. To these postwar intellectuals, ideas had severe consequences, contexts and nature constricted human action, and history loomed very large indeed. While the turmoil and chaos of the 1960s caused tremors, it was not until the quakes of oil embargoes, unemployment, and inflation in the 1970s, that fault lines in this ideological consensus emerged. Into this breach, a lexicon of microeconomic principles, which had been forming for decades in libertarian circles that stressed agency, contingency, and reason emerged, promising solutions to seemingly intractable problems of disco-era stagflation. Instead of focusing on property and production, workers and owners, these economists celebrated instead the slight of (an invisible) hand that produced wealth and fostered the virtues of competition.

The vocabulary, metaphors, and grammar of the free market boosters seeped into academic discussions. Instead of the public solidity of politics and pressure groups, American historians, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, and literary scholars seeking to understand the formulations of class and exercise of power, now uncovered the ineluctable influence of culture and diffuse workings of hegemony. Gramsci, Geertz, and Foucault replaced Marxist dialectics while close readings of popular songs, prisons, and cockfights superseded analyses of elections, parties, and unions. This cultural turn reshaped the color line as well as race came to be viewed less as a fixed state and more as a social construction. Notions of gender, likewise became subject to preoccupations with language and consciousness-raising rather than investigations into the architecture of patriarchy.

But the heart of *Age of Fracture* lies in the penultimate chapter, “The Little Platoons of Society,” titled after a phrase found in Burke that identified local groups as the source of significant affinities. In contrast to Rousseau’s social contract where citizens cede sovereignty to the government in exchange for order, Burke found in neighborhood groups and voluntary associations loyalty-earning organizations that offered the best hope of social harmony. The chapter opens with a lucid analysis of the redistributive justice scheme of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, which set the parameters for discussions about equality and justice for the next decade. Deploying the decision-making premise of rational actors in a marketplace, Rawls held that, as the economy grew, bounty would spread as those in power put into place buffers for the
powerless in a “There but for the grace of God go I” calculation. Ironically, it was in 1971, the same year as the book was published, that the U.S. economy, which had facilitated such hypothetical largesse, screeched to a grinding halt and the engines that worked to close income gaps since the end of World War II “quietly slipped into reverse.” The causes were numerous. On the supply side, women entered the workforce in larger numbers than ever before and globalization of production and markets brought more laborers into competition with each other. Meanwhile, unions lost their power, cheap oil disappeared, and the simultaneous appearance of unemployment and inflation stumped economists.

What followed next was an awkward pas de deux between libertarians and traditional conservatives, with the likes of George Will vaunting community and evolutionary change rather than abstract tinkering by bureaucrats and Milton Friedman skewering the notion that society, rather than individuals, had moral obligations. Traditional conservatives were the true keepers of the civil republican flame because they wanted enterprise without the avarice, the sacred, not the profane, humility, not hubris. But most on the right agreed that equality was a fool’s errand in a world where hierarchy, whether divinely ordained or not, was the reality. They held out the principles of civic republicanism as the best means for individuals to achieve the American dream of social mobility and for the nation to realize the promise of democracy. But theirs was a streamlined republican moralism that venerated industry, initiative, and thrift while sidestepping sympathy, self-sacrifice, and fairness; had Ben Franklin adhered to this version of his Thirteen Virtues, he would have patented all of his inventions to reap wealth rather than leave them free to contribute to the public good.

With the assumption of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, the “great U-turn” (as Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone deemed it) that reversed decades of progress narrowing the gap between rich and poor, went into full throttle. Deindustrialization, deregulation, and international competition for jobs and products coincided with a spike in urban homelessness, a crack cocaine epidemic, and drug gang violence. The poor in the 1980s looked different and seemed to inhabit a different moral universe; while the whole world seemed to be moving at a faster pace in an increasingly fragmented universe, they remained surprisingly static and mired. Well-meaning liberals and anecdote-inclined conservatives alike trained the spotlight of vivid words on the new “underclass.” How could they be helped? Who was responsible for them? Money did not seem to offer answers. After all, the tremendous cost incurred by Great Society programs seemed to result in more welfare recipients, illegitimate children, and urban strife. As conservatives liked to point out, if you would have asked someone in 1960 if the American government spent billions of dollars on the poor, would the country witness more violence or less, most would have said less. The fact that there was more suggested that something other than income had to be at play. And this new class of dependent poor (well, those that received press attention) seemed startlingly unabashed: Cadillac-driving pimps, welfare queens, unrepentant, gun-wielding teens. Funded by a growing array of conservative think tanks, writers, such as Charles Murray, insisted that government handouts exacerbated, instead of ameliorated, the problem and urged Horatio Alger style self-help, as a panacea.
In tracking these “shifting debates over society and societal obligations” Rodgers reveals his ultimate intent: *Age of Fracture* is, to some degree, a history of the Progressive Era in reverse. His previous books—*The Work Ethic in America, 1850-1920*, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence*—signal his interest in moralizers, the “unworthy poor,” shaping words, and the latticework of ideas that framed attitudes toward work in an age of industrialization. In the magisterial *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Rodgers set off on a transatlantic quest for the holy grail of historians of the Progressive Era: unearthing the origins of the reform ethos. He built on Robert Wiebe’s classic synthesis *The Search for Order* (1967), *No Place of Grace* (1981) by Jackson Lears, and James Kloppenberg’s *Uncertain Victory* (1986) to demonstrate the motivation, origins, and strategies of middle class reformers who buttressed the effects of modern society with rural co-ops, workmen’s compensation, public housing, and city parks.

While Progressive era chroniclers traced the movement from autonomous farmers to time clock-punching employees in an industrializing, mass culture America, bringing centralization and regulations for states and compassion for its citizens as they worked to solve trenchant social problems, Rodgers, in *Age of Fracture* shifts this chronology. He marks out the story of “disaggregation,” which features newly autonomous individuals in a deindustrializing, multicultural nation armed with deregulation, decentralization schemes, and tough love. Instead of modernism and class politics, Rodgers tracks postmodernism and identity politics and, unlike the earlier “ministers of reform” who had moved away from the stern religion of their parents to embrace the Social Gospel, Christians in the Reagan era embraced fundamentalism.

In the final chapter, Rodgers turns to the history vogue in the Nasdaq 90s. To explain the popularity of Civil War reenactors, E.D. Hirsch’s cultural primers, and Ronald Reagan’s recollections of cinematic moments (which sometimes stood in for actual historical events), Rodgers employs the metaphor of “Wrinkles in Time”: the simultaneous immersion in the present and fascination with the past accessed through a metaphorical “trap door.” Applied in legal circles, this resulted in “strict constructionists” who eschewed considerations of equality in their telic quest to discern original meaning. The exercise of law came to resemble Biblical exegesis: consult a concordance (the Constitution) and intuit authorial intent (Founding Fathers). But, instead of the historical origami found in Madeline L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), with its overtones of Christian theology, Rodgers might have used a secular referent from the period under review, particularly given that other key examples transcend political and religious lines. The 1985 film classic “Back to the Future” offers an ideal alternative. In the movie, teenager Marty McFly is transported back in time through a friend’s invention called the flux capacitor. Attached to a car, it allowed time travel. Attached to the constitution, it transposed Federal Society members in Rodgers’s analysis to eighteenth century constitutional conventions. Skipping over huge tracts of time could not please Burkean conservatives who prized continuity, but it provided ballast to those with more radical ideas about process and power.

Flux capacitor cogitation also influenced the thinking of experts who flocked to post-communist countries in Europe and Russia bearing neoliberal ideas about free trade,
privatization, and austerity protocols. They believed the transition from controlled economies to full-fledged markets had to occur in a flash (a plan that Naomi Klein identifies as a “shock doctrine” conspiracy of neoliberal elites but that Rodgers labels, with less foreboding, an effort to slip the coils of physical time), just as American markets, after fifty years of the New Deal, had been freed to return to their “normal” unregulated state. End of the world prophecies and end of history pronouncements similarly suffered this DeLorean delusion as did George W. and his cabinet with their decision to invade Iraq: they could, they believed, transform the Middle East despite a millennia of history trending otherwise, into a modern, capitalist democracy simply by igniting a spark.

Rodgers dissects the process by which conservatives changed their ideas after encountering important major tomes (though at times this come across as Tim Russert-style “gotcha” moments). Liberal do-gooders in the Age of Aquarius, not Christian Republicans in the era of big hair bands, rolled out the first plans for school voucher programs. The term “underclass,” which conservatives used to demonize the inner-city poor was first employed by a triumvirate of high profile leftists (Eleanor Holmes Norton, Ted Kennedy, and William Julius Wilson) not by shock jocks performing an act of rhetorical legerdemain. Codes regulating speech, far from being alien rules imported by tenured radicals, were commonplace in nineteenth century schools, church-affiliated colleges, and Jerry Falwell’s own Liberty University. Robert Bork began his career criticizing the Warren Court for overreaching, deigning as it did to intuit framer’s intentions regarding the Fourteenth Amendment. Yet, only a decade later he had become a fierce proponent of strict interpretation. Justice Antonin Scalia too ripped into the Warren Court for veering into psychology and social issues but by the 1990s was employing such justifications himself. When Bill Clinton announced a plan for a federal service corps, conservatives jeered, but, when George W. rolled out his own version during the Zero Years, they applauded. The about-faces demonstrate the fluid nature of categories of liberal and conservative and the distortions of binary distinctions, but Rodgers does not take to task those on the left for their own evolving positions (given, he is primarily interested in explaining how the liberal state was delegitimized).

One of the great pleasures of Age of Fracture is the sheer joy that Rodgers seems to take in words. The book begins and ends with an analysis of the words used in Presidential addresses. Throughout, he offers OED-style exercises in etymology: how language changed, narrowed, distilled into orthodoxy, and eclipsed visions. Rodgers presents a broader time frame with which to analyze ideas associated with Reagan’s tenure. Far from being the Decade of Greed, as I have argued elsewhere (http://hnn.us/articles/57698.html), it was actually not until well after Reagan left office that the values of commerce won a decisive victory over civic virtues. And, in some sense, it is a relief to read a book about the last quarter of the twentieth century that gets beyond the by now familiar tropes about the rise and fall of the New Deal coalition, triumph of conservatism, and the culture wars as 1960s redux.

Having said that, the book could have included other relevant thinkers, as Robert Westbrook has noted in an astute review (http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/017_04/6686).
Westbrook mentions Martha Nussbaum and, surely, her brilliant and beautifully written *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) would have informed Rodgers’s survey of the competing obligations that citizens, in the grip of contingency, faced. Nussbaum examined “the aspiration to rational self-sufficiency in Greek ethical thought: the aspiration to make the goodness of a good human life safe from luck through the controlling power of reason.” Greek thinkers wrestled, as did, Nussbaum noted, contemporary Americans, with a central question: “How much luck can we humanly live with? How much should we live with, in order to live the life that is best and most valuable for a human being?” Westbrook also critiques the lack, at times, of sufficient causal analyses. Why did the language and values of free markets triumph so decisively? How did the fall of Communism across Europe and in Russia affect attitudes toward liberal Democrats in America who, for decades, had insisted that the Soviet economy was outperforming domestic capitalism? Cold War triumphalism was grounded in the reality that the prime alternative to free markets had been defeated. In that scenario, why heed those who were wrong? Along those lines, why didn’t liberals offer a more robust defense of communitarian principles? Focusing on the progressives’ multicultural and linguistic turn leaves unexamined some significant missteps, which did not go unnoticed among the working class in those parts of the country hardest hit by deindustrialization—the manufacturing cities of the Midwest and Northeast—who switched party affiliation to become Sunbelt and Rustbelt Republicans. The usual story about backlash and resentment, perpetrated famously in Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, misses the point. Rodgers, however, is on the right track. A more vertical study that presents a cross-section of values would help to illuminate the common bonds that tied blue collar Catholics to blue blood conservatives.

An intellectual historian who clearly delineates his methodology, Rodgers rarely ventures outside the realm of books and articles to explain how conceptions are formed, leading to some connections that ring hollow. In discussing the post-Fordist focus on the present, no mention is made of CNN, personal computers, or the ubiquity of media images. Ideas about race are dissected without analysis of the impact wielded by rap music, MTV, or films like “Boyz n the Hood,” giving the appearance that Charles Murray was primarily responsible for stereotypes that linked skin color to violence. Murray said little that Archie Bunker hadn’t already articulated more than a decade earlier and, while liberals were busy decrying the possessive investment in whiteness, ethnic Americans were denouncing the possessive investment in racism among the well-heeled. While lending sheen and coherence to a neat narrative about fracture, the methodology of intellectual history can skew analysis of issues and omit important developments.

At the American Historical Association meeting panel discussion devoted to *Age of Fracture* this past January, Rodgers posed an important question, one that I would like to address. He asked why it has taken so long for historians to write about the last decades of the twentieth century (except, of course, that one man cottage industry, Gil Troy, who has written three books on Reagan). By the time Rodgers was in graduate school in the early 1970s, scholars had already produced monographs on the Vietnam War. I would like to pose an answer. At the heart of the
Reagan-Bush era, the moral center of the period, is the AIDS crisis, the callous reaction to victims, and the lurid homophobia that sanctioned death. Historians, as a profession, have not come to terms with these events. Look at the index to almost any book on the 1980s and AIDS along with the hatred of gay people that fueled the epidemic are barely mentioned. Rodgers devotes three pages to the topics, mostly talking about the response to AIDS among homosexual Americans only and the formulations of queer theorists. In his examination of race and racism, conversely, Rodgers delves deep and wide, devoting an entire chapter to the topic and strewing comments throughout the text. He even makes a rare foray into pop culture, nodding toward the contributions of Sanford & Son, the television mini-series Roots, Bill Cosby, Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. He discusses “the new black presence in public life” and the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and black arts movement, and he goes into loving detail about the conscious quest of African American authors to inculcate race pride. He cites polls from Black Enterprise magazine about black solidarity and decries the “day-to-day injuries imposed by the social marks of race in American society.” Willie Horton, Jesse Jackson, the Los Angeles riots, Anita Hill, and the debate among black intellectuals about the persistence of poverty are all there. The chapter on gender is less comprehensive but still works toward explaining relevant questions. The history of lesbian activism is briefly mentioned (but nothing about the rates of poverty among gay women) in that chapter, mainly as an outgrowth of feminism. Where are the gay intellectuals, writers, and activists? Where is Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, Larry Kramer, Sarah Schulman, Cleve Jones, John D’Emilio’s landmark, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the US, 1940-1970 (1983), The Celluloid Closet (1996), Lauren Berlant, Gayle Rubin, Matthew Shepard, and Ellen Degeneres? Where are the concerns about injuries inflicted on gay Americans, about their struggle for pride and dignity in the midst of denial and death? Citing this omission is not just a plea for inclusion of yet another oppressed group. As Eva Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in Epistemology of the Closet (1990), leaving out queer voices distorts the historical lens. And, if these voices are needed to understand any era, it is most certainly the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years when anti-gay bigotry was embedded in social and intellectual life. Who else was subject to more vitriol? What other community suffered as many casualties as a result of the government’s inaction? Estimates place the number of lynchings during Jim Crow as high as 5,000. Over 58,000 Americans died in the Vietnam War. Between 1981 and 2000, the Center for Disease Control estimates that 459,518 Americans died of AIDS (http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/surveillance/resources/reports/2002supp_vol8no1/pdf/table2.pdf). Today, approximately 5,000 people die every day because of AIDS, a global calamity that, some scientists argue, could have been controlled had the federal government responded swiftly in 1981 to news of deaths. But the victims were members of a marginalized minority and received no compassion, a key emotion that Rodgers seeks to trace as it relates to the poor. Around the world today twenty-five million people have died of AIDS. If Rodgers was reaching for a capacious survey of shaping intellectual ideas, how could he ignore this disease or the ideologies and language that allowed it to become a pandemic? The word AIDS itself would benefit from a
Rodgers-style definition. Paula Treichler takes on this challenge to analyze the construction of AIDS as an “epidemic of signification” with culture, medicine, linguistics, socioeconomic status, gender, class, and race all influencing scientific naming practices. Considering the emotional and physical toll, it is no wonder that LGBT activist and intellectual Urvashi Vaid writes that “For lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people, the Reagan-Bush years were the worst years of our lives.”

Conservatism drew its force from antipathy toward a group of people who loved differently. This animus animated evangelicals and justified indifference to AIDS sufferers among Catholic leaders. It can be found everywhere in sermons, political speeches, journals, and newspapers. It inflected thinking on what constituted “normal,” on sex and gender more generally as well as reproductive rights. William Bennett, included in Age of Fracture for work that expounds on virtues, was Secretary of Education, who, along with his Undersecretary Gary Bauer (who later became head of the Family Research Council), served as the principle spokesmen for Reagan’s AIDS policies. Rick Warren receives mention by Rodgers for forging “more generous even radical frames for evangelical Protestant social thought” but not for barring gays from membership in his Saddleback Church. Pat Buchanan’s 1992 “culture war” speech gets airing for its patriotic invocations, but not his snide remarks about “homosexual rights” and denunciation of gay marriage as “amoral.” Irving Kristol’s work in the knowledge industry is acknowledged but not his charge that homosexuality was a “disease” (Reagan himself referred to it as “a tragic illness”). Andrew Sullivan is quoted for a comment on 9/11 but not for his work influencing political topics as a party-transcending gay, conservative, Catholic editor of The New Republic during Clinton’s first term in office. The issue of gays in the military and same sex marriage played a decisive role in elections, including ballot initiatives in the 1970s, and get-out-the-vote anti-homosexual campaigns, gay-bashing, and gay-baiting in campaigns since then, even affecting the outcome of presidential contests between the “straight panic” years of 1996 and 2004. If Rodgers is interested in the power of ideas, why doesn’t he analyze the origins and allure of anti-gay ideas?

What would Age of Fracture look like if it had included this subject? On some matters, it would have reinforced his assertions. John D’Emilio’s classic essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity” would have fortified the convictions held by many that free markets induced freedom. With pastors and ministers expending so much energy on homosexuality as an abomination and blaming victims for their “choice” little room was left to speak of Jesus as the man who overturned the money tables, preached poverty, humbleness, compassion, and charity, the kind of emotional economy that Rodgers is interested in mapping. The sensational images that clergy invoked were in line with the dramatic imaginings of history that Reagan sometimes conjured. And, the notion that dividing social and intellectual life into left and right results in inaccuracies would have found resonance because some libertarians supported gay rights on the principle of small government and privacy while Log Cabin Republicans belied the notion that gays always leaned left.
However, on other important points, Rodgers would have found his organizing principle, around fracture, did not hold or at least that it was more contested. For example, by citing Butler’s notion of sexuality as a performance, he gives only one side of the debate between nature and nurture. A very large constituency of gay people themselves argued publicly for essentialism. The debate played out on the pages of *Time* and *Newsweek*, *National Review* and *First Things*, *The Advocate* and *Slate.com*, with scientific studies examining the role of genes and hormones in determining sexual orientation. At stake in this ontological question was whether gayness was akin to race and thus deserved legal protections or a choice that could be changed (and criticized).

Any historian studying this period would do well to read Jennifer Brier’s *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (2009), which uses AIDS as a lens through which to view the period. She deftly explores the nexus of class, race, gender, and sexuality that influenced AIDS policies and details the way that AIDS workers mobilized poverty, prison reform, and immigration to create a multi-fronted liberation strategy. While other “rights” groups moved away from critiques of capitalism during the “cultural turn,” gay activists did not. Brier also complicates the story of a unitary conservative stance regarding health policies by parsing out, in particular, the (admittedly futile) efforts of Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, and she moves beyond American borders to assess the pandemic’s impact in the global South, highlighting “the people who refused neoliberal models and became some of the first to insist that economic redistribution was the only way to make people healthy.”

I look forward to scholarship that partners with the major achievement that is *Age of Fracture*, building on Rodgers’s lead to produce even more elaborate and nuanced understandings of this watershed period.