



How the 1970s Made America Both More and Less Equal

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For many Americans, “the 1970s” brings failure to mind. The hasty withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam was accompanied by spectacular pictures of helicopters ditched into the sea in a harried exit under enemy fire. Diplomatic failure was epitomized by the seizure of U.S. hostages in Tehran; and political failures cascaded from the Watergate scandal through the aborted presidencies of not just the impeached Richard Nixon, but also the single-termers Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Most of all, older Americans remember hurtful economic failures: oil crises and endless lines at gas stations, high unemployment accompanied by soaring inflation. The decade was not a pretty picture, and most of us are glad it is far in the past.

A Pivotal Decade

But of course decades full of crises can have long-reverberating effects. Stories of episodic failures do not reveal how directly the 1970s reshaped the United States, as two major transformations began to remake American life in ways that make us who we are today. On one side, a powerful wave of social egalitarianism and inclusiveness gained force, extending the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. Out went old hierarchies, taken-for-granted beliefs that some people deserved better treatment than others. In came a new sense that discrimination of any kind in public life is wrong. In social terms, the United States became dramatically more liberal.

The second major sea change came from the sharply rising influence of free-market principles in shaping public policy. The shifts and traumas of the 1970s prompted a loss of confidence in the activist federal government that had dominated public life since the New Deal of the 1930s. In a move toward longstanding conservative preferences, political leaders in both parties and citizens across the political spectrum turned to market mechanisms to solve political and social problems, as well as economic ones. Over time, skepticism about government together with the hegemony of free-market ideas have contributed to policies that fuel sharply rising disparities in income, wealth, and chances for Americans to get ahead economically.

America Eliminates Group Discrimination

The 1970s turn to egalitarian ideals and practices was as sweeping as it was breathtaking, extending rights gained by African Americans to many other groups:

- This was the decade when the United States ended most practices of segregation by sex. American women, more than half the population, gained formally equal rights to pursue education and employment opportunities. All Americans began to think in new ways about gender – and what it meant to be male and female.
- Gays and lesbians became publicly visible. The first gay rights marches took place in 1970, and three years later the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its formal list of mental disorders.
- Disabled people began the process of joining the mainstream. Federal legislation in 1975 required public schools to integrate disabled students into regular classrooms to the fullest extent possible, paving the way for the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Starting in the 1970s, new waves of immigration led to steady, large flows of new arrivals to the United States from non-European parts of the globe, especially Latin America and Asia. America would soon become less a society of blacks and whites, and more a societal tapestry of many hues with citizens and residents from more diverse national backgrounds.

The United States Turns to Market-Based Solutions

Just as pervasive was the 1970s pivot from trust in government to free-market ideals and deregulated policies:

- The All-Volunteer Military replaced the draft in 1973, ending the obligation of all citizens to register for the draft and perhaps be selected to help defend their country. Since then, young people and their families weigh labor market opportunities to decide which young adults – usually the less privileged – will volunteer to risk sacrifice of life and limb.
- Beginning with the 1978 referendum to pass Proposition 13 in California, tax revolts have spread and entered partisan politics, leading to a steady decline in overall tax rates. Taxes are no longer discussed as a common duty, “the price of civilization,” but are derided as an unjust burden to be reduced in any way possible.
- Also in 1978, deregulation of industry began in the airlines and communications sectors, later spreading to all sectors of the U.S. economy. Both parties regularly decry government management of the economy as a problem more than a solution.
- In 1976, Atlantic City, New Jersey, legalized casinos, the first step in the spread of legalized gambling across the country. Other once “deviant” social practices have also been encouraged or allowed – as the whole country becomes more like “Nevada.”

The Consequences Today

Spurred by 1970s movements, the United States is now vastly more egalitarian and inclusive. We have a black President, female Secretaries of State, a Supreme Court without a single Protestant, and gay and lesbian soldiers serving openly in the Marines. But America is also increasingly economically unequal, even as most citizens are left unsure that government can do anything about it. Optimistic assumptions about the “free market” and derisive dismissal of “government,” “politics” and “taxes” are legacies of the 1970s too. Social freedom combined with rising divides between the rich and everyone else creates the knottiest challenges American democracy faces today – on the doorstep, perhaps, of yet another era of unprecedented change.

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