The Myth of the Fifties

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The era usually denoted as “the Fifties” generated a remarkable set of social indicators. For the one hundred years prior to 1941, the American marriage rate was in decline. The proportion of the adult population that was married also fell steadily, while the divorce rate began a seemingly inexorable rise; by 1910 (and thanks largely to Nevada), the United States was the divorce capital of the world. Fertility also showed relentless decline, falling more than 50 percent among the native-born population. Meanwhile, income inequality grew in finance capitalism’s wake. Great fortunes and grand mansions found their counterparts in the squalor of America’s urban slums. A nation dominated by freehold farmers became a land of sharecroppers and urban tenants, as property ownership grew ever more concentrated. In political terms, conservative values and free markets gave way to secularism, progressivism, and moral individualism.

Then came the 1941–65 period, “the Fifties,” and everything seemed to change. The marriage rate soared; the average age of first marriage fell to twenty for women, twenty-two for men—near record lows. By 1960, the proportion of adults, age forty, who were or had been married reached 96 percent, a record high. Even the divorce rate, after a postwar spike in 1946, declined for the next dozen years. Most notably, marital fertility climbed sharply, almost doubling by 1957 in the celebrated Baby Boom. At the same time, measures of income inequality (such as the Gini index) shrank as the numbers of the very rich and very poor fell while the great American middle class swelled. Undergirded by federal housing and mortgage insurance programs, a revolution in property ownership commenced. Between 1945 and 1960, the number of owner-occupied homes nearly doubled, restoring America as a land of property owners. Church membership soared, Sunday schools were bursting at the seams, and President Dwight Eisenhower beamed a comforting, genially conservative smile over the land. The one discordant note was a budding youth culture, fueled by rock ’n’ roll.

Alan Petigny is largely unimpressed by all this. In his important and provocative book, The Permissive Society: America, 1941–1965, Petigny—an assistant professor of history at the University of Florida—challenges in particular what he calls “the four great myths of the 1950s”: (1) the belief that religious piety was on the rise, seen in the popularity of Billy Graham and rising rates of church attendance; (2) the proposition that American sexual behavior was relatively stable during this time, with the sexual revolution arriving only in the 1960s; (3) the claim that the status of women was losing ground during this era of domesticity; and (4) the belief that the youth culture of this period represented a vigorous challenge to the values of the adult world.
Instead, he argues that American values were going through a fundamental transition in these years, driven by the democratization of psychology, the “medicalization” of ailments such as alcoholism (formerly seen as moral questions), the emergence of a therapeutic theology in the churches, and the liberalization of child-rearing practices under the influence of Benjamin Spock and friends.

**Permissive Turn**

In all this, Petigny sees “an inversion” of the Marxist understanding of the relation between ideas and the material world: “the ideological superstructure took precedence over the material base.” This shift in values represented a permissive turn in American life, one beginning in the 1940s, not the 1960s. He gives special emphasis to the human displacements that occurred during World War II: fifteen million young men into the military, and five million young women into the factories. This great mixing of young adults spawned massive changes in sexual relations, ranging from a rise in the proportion of premaritally conceived pregnancies among whites and blacks alike to the emergence of egalitarian “companionate” marriages.

Such an argument is not completely new. John Costello anticipated this dating of the start of the sexual revolution in his serious book, *Virtue Under Fire* (1985); so did Allan Sherman in his irreverent and bawdy—though nevertheless insightful—1972 “Official History of the Sex Revolution” for the Playboy Press, entitled *The Rape of the A*P*E* (*American*Puritan*Ethic). In *The Hearts of Men* (1983), feminist author Barbara Ehrenreich also emphasized—as does Petigny—the significance of the founding of *Playboy* magazine in 1953 as a transformative challenge to traditional sexual ethics long before the first bra was burned in the 1960s. And Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound* (1988) showed the complexity of husband-wife relations during the postwar years.

Petigny’s contribution is to frame this counterintuitive view of “The Good War” and “The Happy Days” that followed in a rich analysis of the intellectual and scientific developments that undermined older American values. The author notes, for example, “the decline and fall of original sin,” evidenced at the theological level in Norman Vincent Peale’s gassy *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) and also in the popular new psychology of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. As the latter explained in 1949, “I can report empirically [that] the healthiest persons in our culture . . . are most (not least) pagan, most (not least) ‘instinctive,’ most (not least) accepting of their animal nature.” By the mid-1950s, Petigny shows, Billy Graham was moving away from fundamentalism, moderating his message, and declaring his admiration for theological liberals such as Peale and Reinhold Niebuhr. Meanwhile, both Protestant and Catholic clerics moved enthusiastically into a new form of pastoral counseling, shaped by Freudian psychoanalysis.

Petigny demonstrates keen insight into other contentious issues. He challenges, for instance, the common argument that the introduction of the birth control pill in the early 1960s launched the sexual revolution, showing how cost, convenience, and clerical opposition constrained its use for some time. He also marshals admittedly limited evidence to show that the use of condoms and other forms of birth control was spreading well before the arrival of the Pill. In addition, he explains how a new celebration of spontaneity reshaped the arts during the 1940s and 1950s. This overturning of stylistic conventions
ranged from Jackson Pollock’s paint-spat-tered canvases to the jazz improvisations of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis.

He mobilizes survey data to deny femi-nist complaints that American homes during this era rested on the systematic repression of women. Instead, most homes were based on “egalitarian” relationships. The number of working women climbed steadily during “the Fifties,” partly because of a Baby Boom–driven demand for teachers and nurses. Women made real political gains as well, with the proportion of women in Congress and the state legislatures climbing steadily. Petigny even makes a compelling case that the Boy Scouts of America, symbol of the ordered patriotism of the early twentieth century, actually lost ground in this era. While the number of younger Cub Scouts climbed impressively, the proportion of them who transitioned into the more demanding Boy Scouts fell.

Myths regarding the youth culture of the era also fall before Petigny’s analysis. While acknowledging the musical revolution implicit in rock ’n’ roll and the alienation portrayed in James Dean’s Rebel without a Cause (1955) and in J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye (1951), the author notes the widespread support that this new music found among adults and the implicit social conservatism of the last two products. The problem was not prevailing American values; it was the failure of “phonies” and henpecked fathers to live up to expectations. Adult acceptance of rock ’n’ roll also grew naturally out of the permissive child-rearing practices of the postwar era. A conservative political veneer masked deeper changes. As Petigny summarizes, “many of the same people who were applauding the efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy, casting ballots for Dwight Eisenhower, and heading off to church each Sunday were also raising their children along increasingly ‘progressive’ lines and adopting a sympathetic stance toward psychology” and “the therapeutic approach to religion.”

The Social Conservative’s Dilemma

All the same, there are a few gaps in the book. For example, the author gives relatively little attention to the historically anomalous nature of the Marriage and Baby Booms of this era. He seems simply to accept these developments as a consequence of the war. Yet nothing like this had happened after previous American wars. The surge in fertility is particularly striking. It violated all the “laws” of sociology, including the general rule that the more education a woman has, the fewer children. During the 1950s, it was women with college degrees who showed the greatest gains in family size. Why?

While Petigny gives considerable attention to Protestant figures such as Peale and Graham, and makes a compelling case that gains in Protestant church attendance were ephemeral, he barely notices Roman Catholics, America’s largest denomination. He does show that principles of secular psychology were creeping into Catholic pastoral counseling, but he misses some other developments. In retrospect, for example, we can see the 1941–65 period as arguably the apogee of the Catholic experience in America. Catholic parishes displayed extraordinary vitality; the Catholic educational edifice—from parochial grade schools to great universities—was still largely orthodox in teaching and governance and impressive in numbers.

Even the Baby Boom might be seen as a distinctly Catholic event. While fertility rose for all American religious groups during the 1941–65 period, it rose far more impressively among Catholics. The total
marital fertility rate for non-Catholics averaged 3.15 per woman in 1951–55 and 3.14 in 1961–65; for Catholics, the respective figures were 3.54 and 4.25. Only 10 percent of Catholics under age forty reported having four or more children in 1952–55, close to the Protestant figure of 9 percent. By 1957–59, the Protestant figure was unchanged, but the proportion for Catholics had more than doubled to 22 percent. Why this difference? The author does acknowledge the dramatic increase in young Catholic men and women entering religious vocations during these years. However, instead of seeing this as still another sign of Catholic renewal and health, he dismisses it as an exception.

Indeed, Petigny might have bolstered his argument by examining other aspects of “the Fifties” that are left mostly untouched. The era was the apogee of the home economics movement, training that remained highly popular among American college women in the 1950s. How did its emphasis on “scientific” homemaking and consumption fit into the broad worship of science that Petigny describes? His book also says little about the dramatic growth of the family-centered suburbs. How did assumptions about the egalitarian, companionate family negatively affect housing design and community planning?

At another level, however, Petigny’s analysis leaves social conservatives facing a fairly large dilemma. The Fifties seemed to be the one clear example in modern American history of social, cultural, and moral renewal. Families appeared to be growing stronger. Burgeoning church construction and swelling Sunday schools betokened a measurable form of religious revival. The suburban revolution seemed to restore America as a land of property owners, with adult consumption patterns focused on family life and children. In essence, Petigny’s argument is that these were all ephemeral developments, almost illusions, and the strongest evidence in support of his view is the rapidity with which these signs of social health evaporated in “the Sixties” (notably, even “Catholic exceptionalism” on matters of family and fertility had vanished by 1970).

The implication for twenty-first-century social conservatives is that there are no secular or easy paths back to social health. The great array of “pro-family” organizations in Washington and Colorado Springs can accomplish little. Nor can the suburban megachurches offering “a different way to do church.” Only the voluntary submission of adults to demanding religious disciplines (think Latin Mass Catholics, “Quiverfull” Evangelicals, Mormons, Hutterites, and so on) remains as a viable path back to family health.

In this respect, *The Permissive Society* is not only a valuable work of history and a refreshing correction to the myths that surround the Fifties. It is also an indirect summons to a more difficult, yet real, form of religious and social renewal.

Son of the Third Way

*Arthur W. Hunt III*

*Hope in a Scattering Time: A Life of Christopher Lasch* by Eric Miller (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010)

At the age of fourteen, Christopher Lasch told his teacher just exactly what he thought about a particular book report she had assigned. This is just another example of “progressive education” and its “project system,” he wrote in the report.