

Editors' Introduction

In early March 2004, just as this issue of *Radical History Review* was going to press, two assaults catalyzed by supporters of the American religious Right received a disproportionate amount of national and international attention. The first, the release of Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, instigated numerous discussions, in both the religious and secular media, of everything from charges of anti-Semitism to critiques that Gibson's literal-minded interpretation of the story of Jesus willfully ignores a half century of new interpretations of the New Testament by modern Catholics and even the Vatican. At approximately the same moment, George W. Bush declared his support for a constitutional amendment that would make same-sex marriage illegal, enlivening debates both within liberal and conservative circles about how the institution of marriage should be defined in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although none of those campaigning for the Democratic nomination at the time supported such an amendment, most steered clear from openly challenging its inherent unconstitutionality and stopped just short of confirming the Bush camp's traditional take on marriage as that "between a man and a woman." In the end, only Dennis Kucinich and Al Sharpton endorsed the idea of same-sex marriage as celebrated, however temporarily, at civil ceremonies at City Hall in San Francisco in late February.

What will future historians make of this apparent confluence of events and themes, if anything at all? Although neither Bush nor Gibson could be reasonably accused of synchronizing their efforts, both the campaigns for Gibson's film and for Bush's amendment seemed remarkable for the cumulative power of their concerted appeals to the seductions of traditionalism, an especially potent form of reactionary nostalgia familiar to anyone who survived the so-called culture wars of the late 1980s. Traditionalism is an ingenious rhetorical mechanism that protects its adherents from criticism or the need for further elaboration since its main power resides

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in its capacity to conflate political decision making with the implacable force of moral superiority or religious authority. Of course, traditionalism hardly makes for an American phenomenon, nor is it one in any way particular to the twenty-first century. Even in our era of postmodern fragmentation under late capitalism, the disingenuous exploitation of language from the traditionalist dictionary—*family, nation, race, evil, justice*—continues to provide the political syntax that enables and sustains hegemonies of all kinds, from the practices of empire to the politics of the bedroom.

For religious and political conservatives moved by the lure of such arguments, traditionalism—not unlike Gibson’s Jesus or Bush’s notion of marriage—constitutes the indestructible text that gives coherence to our uncertain world. For Gibson and Bush, it is the agent of truth and self-preservation that liberals, atheists, multiculturalists, and queers of all stripes endeavor to push to the margins with their bag of de(con)structive tricks. But the rhetorical threat that traditionalism, as an ideological tool of the Right, poses to the political realm is only part of the havoc that it often wreaks. Throughout the world, one sees in traditionalism its capacity for crass historical revisionism; traditionalism can be not only a reactionary, even hostile, act but, in many instances, can push back or outright erase the profound contributions of individual actors, social movements, and historic events that expose traditionalism’s often illegitimate claims to political or ethical superiority. In the United States, Bush’s proposed amendment is shocking not only for its desire to relegate nontraditional individuals and families to second-class citizenship but for its audacious disavowal of the history of recent legal decisions around gender and sexual rights, all declared unconstitutional, such as antimiscegenation laws, the sterilization of the “feeble-minded” under eugenics-inspired legislation, or last year’s decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*.

Traditionalism, then, is the primary mode that conservatives—especially those who claim that traditionalism’s alleged neutrality inures it from criticism or challenges to its natural authority—use to rewrite history and reshape cultural memory. As Pope John Paul II is said to have commented, in his defense of the historical accuracy and spiritual fidelity of Gibson’s film, “It is as it was.” But our collective future need not be held hostage by unyieldingly smug assertions of traditionalism, any more than our collective past need be held hostage by nostalgic images imputed to an exclusive and distorted version of national mythology or cultural memory.

This issue of *RHR* is intended as an intervention into the politics of traditionalism in an attempt to disentangle appeals to tradition—a social resource whose power only increases in proximity to events such as, say, presidential elections—from the profound complexities of national histories or cultural memories that often, but not always, contest tradition. In particular, this issue helps us to historicize the ways in which cultural memories are formed, challenged, and even often erased for the sake of expedience, sometimes even among those who practice or uphold the

values of radical history or social justice. Many of the articles, reflections, and review essays included here demonstrate how appeals to cultural memory or national mythology can be applied, or misapplied, by those making claims to tradition in order to transform the narratives of nationhood.

Jarod Roll's essay, for example, challenges contemporary confluences of religious fundamentalism with political conservatism in the United States by placing an episode in the early history of Pentecostalism within the context of working-class radicalism and white supremacist politics in early-twentieth-century Missouri. Roll's essay marks an important turning point in historiographies of religious movements and local and regional expressions of radical politics and exposes how claims to traditional culture never remain untainted by political complexities. Similarly, Vincent DiGirolamo, in his essay in the "(Re)Views" section, compares recent books on New York City history with the depiction of early-nineteenth-century history in Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York* and discovers the disparities between how historians and filmmakers deal with cultural conflict, class politics, and urban ethnic group histories.

Gary Wilder's essay takes on the intellectual legacies of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, both giants in transnational black history and postcolonial theory. Using close readings of texts that have transformed the interdisciplinary field of postcolonial studies, Wilder demonstrates that both Césaire and Fanon intimately understood the cumulative effects that their respective writings would have on diasporic expressions of transnational black cultural memory in Africa, France, the Caribbean, and throughout the world. Discussions of recent museum exhibitions in Ireland and Corsica by, respectively, Ian Fletcher and Don Reid in the "(Re)Views" section build on some of these themes, pitting histories of colonialism against the memories—individual, institutional, and transnational—of the colonized.

Other departments in this issue address the themes of race, nation, and cultural memory in related though distinctly different ways. In the "Intervention" section, for example, Adina Back reminds us, on the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, that segregation remained a fact of life for nonwhite schoolchildren in northern and midwestern cities well into the 1970s. The return of segregated schools and unequal distribution of funds for black and Latino school districts in the 1990s, Back argues, should minimize the tendency to celebrate the victory of *Brown* without problematizing its legacies. Back's intervention into the history of public education is substantiated by Meredith Raimondo's review essay of two recent books that provide case studies for exploring the complex knot of race, health policy, and local politics within recent histories of public health.

The books, museum exhibitions, films, and photographs that are the subjects of this issue's "(Re)Views" section demonstrate, in their respective ways, how tensions taking place between definitions of traditional culture and individual and

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group redefinitions of the tools of society always seem to result in new configurations of cultural activity and new possibilities of historical interpretation: from Nichole T. Rustin's review essay that examines the introduction of jazz in Japan and China to Amy Sue Bix's review that plumbs the depths of white-collar identity in the information economy to Lewis Siegelbaum's exegesis on the iconography of Soviet-made trucks in contemporary Iraq. For Rod Bush, who looks at a new history of 1960s radicalism, new cultural configurations—such as the inspiration provided by international political figures like Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara—can often lead to the promise of a different future, even if sometimes that future becomes nothing more than a fleeting memory. And in the “Historians at Work” section, Eliza Jane Reilly interviews Richard Moser—educator, scholar, activist, and currently with the American Association of University Professors. Moser describes his intellectual and activist work to redefine academic labor and, in particular, his influential role in revising the traditional view among academics that they are immune to oppression as members of a privileged class.

One final note: Issue 90 marks *RHR*'s last nonthematic issue, that is, the last issue for which we are publishing articles collected without a specific call for papers. Beginning with issue 91, each issue of *RHR* will be coordinated around one central transdisciplinary theme that will allow for much greater intellectual and political synergy between familiar departments. Forthcoming issues of *RHR* will explore such themes as homeland security, the new imperialism, disability and history, art and politics, public history and memory, and prisons and punishment. Calls for papers for future issues are available on our Web site (chnm.gmu.edu/rhr). We look forward to your submissions and inquiries, and are grateful for your continued support.

—Eliza Jane Reilly and David Serlin