Liberal left wielded more clout than standard view holds

The 20th century went out on a conservative wave that, in the final decades of the era, dominated U.S. culture and politics.

Really?

No, says historian Marisa Chappell, who rejects the widespread historical rendering of the final years of the last millennium as a conservative triumph. Her new book, Poor People Power, will argue that the “political left did not so much decline as transform in the 1970s…I argue that grassroots low-income activism mattered, playing a role in shaping the Democratic Party and government policy.”

To make her case, Chappell is focusing on the longest-lived of the left-leaning activist groups, known as ACORN—Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Working from the 1970s through the early 21st century, she said, the activists built an effective multiracial and multiethnic working class constituency that won popular support, successfully challenged neoliberal policies, and portended a leftward shift in American politics.

Chappell is intrigued by the reaction to this group by the political right, which exploded in 2008 with accusations against ACORN, including charges of massive voter fraud and using public money to promote illegal activity such as tax evasion and sex trafficking.

“Why did an organization of 400,000 members, predominantly poor urban minorities, suddenly spark such widespread and virulent attacks from the political right, whose free-market agenda was heavily supported by the vast wealth of corporations and conservative donors?”

The book highlights significant ideological divides within the Democratic Party, and “breaks new ground by recovering the voices of poor and working-class communities, with women often at the

Fellows and their projects:

Juan Herrera
Language, Culture, & Society
Care is Political: The State, Philanthropy, and the Making of Latino Nonprofits

Rena Lauer
History, Philosophy, & Religion
Jewish Life and Litigation in the Colonial Courts of Medieval Crete

Michael Osborne
History, Philosophy, & Religion
A Global Biography of Yellow Fever

(Continued on page 5)
Solving the puzzle of the hybrid identity ‘Muslim-Jew’

When four hundred years is not enough time to wipe out the “taint” of being Jewish in a Muslim convert, there must be deep cultural reasons.

A case in point: Muslim legal scholar Ahmad bin Manjur died in the 17th century, yet he is still referred to as a Jew despite his early conversion to Islam. Why Manjur and others like him are likely to be known as Muslim Jews rather than Muslims is the question driving Jonathan Katz’s new book.

“Why, in light of the egalitarianism that characterizes Islam and contributes to its appeal, should Jewish converts have retained the stigma of belonging to a despised pariah group? . . . Why should the hybridized identity of a ‘Muslim Jew’ have emerged?”

Historians assume that many Jews and Christians did convert to Islam in the earliest centuries of Islamic expansion, said Katz, a Center Research Fellow and OSU history faculty member.

“For their descendants, the memory of their religious roots would have melted away over the centuries as part of the historical process of Islamicization. Nonetheless, the historical literature is filled with renowned individuals like Manjur whose Jewish forebears or own Jewish origins figure prominently in their biographies.”

Despite an official attitude of tolerance, reference to a Jewish antecedent is commonly intended as a form of disparagement in a culture where Muslims retained a superior social, judicial, and political status. Forced conversion violated Islamic doctrine, and Jews who did not convert were given protected status in exchange for accepting certain restrictions and paying special taxes—and it is from this “putative notion of tolerance” that the problem arises.

Although conversion surely has been motivated in certain instances by genuine spiritual impulses, said Katz, individual conversion has typically been seen as a matter of expediency, a prerequisite for social and political advancement. By contrast, group conversion tends to imply coercion and threats of physical violence.

The two main views of this history are dramatically at odds: one portrays an egalitarian utopia that fostered a creative symbiosis between Judaism and Islam, the other describes a nightmare of ceaseless persecution. “The reality lies somewhere between. Each interpretation is itself a caricature, and both reflect external political pressures as much as rigorous historical examination.”

To arrive at a more balanced and accurate portrayal, Katz is studying three different communities that resulted from varied responses to the dilemma of exclusion and acceptance, and the distinct hybrid identities that resulted. These are: the 15th-century bildiyyin in Morocco whose assimilation was hampered by 300 years of commercial rivalry with another group; the 17th-century Turkish dönme whose “false messiah” was forcibly converted to Islam; and the 19th-century jaded al-Islam of Mashhad, a large community that converted to Islam in a single night when threatened with destruction and then reverted to Judaism in the 1930s.

. . .it is from this ‘putative notion’ of tolerance that the problem arises. . .

In pursuit of greater understanding of the phenomenon of the hybrid identity “Muslim-Jew,” Katz aims to avoid treating Islam and Judaism as monolithic or fixed identities while taking a broad historical look at the question of Muslim tolerance and acceptance.

“As newspaper headlines unfailingly remind their readers, accommodating difference and negotiating minority rights are among the central challenges facing contemporary Islam and its adherents.”

The true story of an era lies in the bones

For early anatomists, the skull held the brain and therefore the senses. For Christians, the skull was the seat of the soul.

For historian Anita Guerrini, looking at such attitudes toward human bones at the time sheds new light on life and death in early modern Europe. “Although modern ideas about anatomy and physiology emerged in this period, social, political, and religious attitudes toward the body and its fate after death changed more slowly and were often at odds with each other.”

Christian religious doctrine declared the body to be meaningless in comparison with the soul, and local and national governments found the executed body to be a potent symbol of judicial authority. “Yet individuals nonetheless afforded post-mortem power and meaning to the body, and the persistence of relics indicates that theology and popular belief did not always coincide.”

In her current book project, The Bone Collectors: Life, Death, and Commerce in Early Modern Europe, Guerrini is looking at the “making, representing, marketing, displaying, and above all collecting of human bones and skeletons” between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

During this period, skeletons became objects of intensive study by men of science and artists while retaining long-held emotional connotations as symbols of death and as relics. Instructions for making human skeletons appeared in anatomical texts from 1543 onward, said Guerrini, and by the mid-17th century a trade in skeletons and bones developed that included all ranks of society.

“Catalogues, account books, advertisements, illustrations, as well as remaining skeletal artifacts, reveal this worldwide commerce in skeletons, alongside a continued active trade in skeletal relics. Trav-

Taking the long view of societal change

How deeply can a newly graduated gerontologist really understand what it’s like to grow old? How does active service, especially during wartime, affect the way veterans age? How did the generation born in the century-spanning years 1890s to 1910s cope with war, the Depression, shifting gender roles and so much more in a fast-changing world?

Such questions are meat and drink to Rick Settersten, director of the Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children & Families at OSU and a Sabbatical Fellow at the Center. Settersten is devoting the year to three collaborative book projects: a new edition of the Handbook of Theories of Aging; Long-term Outcomes of Military Service: Perspectives on Health and Well-Being; and American Lives in a New Century: The 1900 Generation.

The Handbook tackles theories and concepts built on cumulative knowledge in four disciplinary areas—biology, psychology, social sciences, and policy and practice—as well as recent advances that stretch across traditional disciplinary boundaries to address how aging processes and outcomes are intertwined.

“With 35 chapters and over 75 of the most highly respected gerontologists today, what’s not to love?” said Settersten. “It’s been fascinating to get acquainted with the wide range of primary explanations of aging, from cellular to societal levels.”

(Continued on page 5)
‘Field of Vision,’ paintings from the ranch

Field of Vision’ is more than an artful name for an exhibit of paintings; it describes artist Kitrina Marcroft’s daily life.

“Every image in this series is taken from my world out here at the ranch in the mountains of Central Idaho—what I see from our windows, my studio, when I’m out running with the dogs, hiking, or riding horses.”

The one-woman show includes dozens of richly-colored paintings that feature stylized creatures and physical elements from the natural and created environments, what she describes as “a juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated animals, objects and patterns.”

“My everyday relationship with open, rural lands and wildlife is both intimate and immediate. This relationship has had a profound effect on my artwork. The ebb and flow of seasons and the weather, the impact on the landscape from both nature and human activity. These things weave an intricate pattern on the world around me.”

A 1984 graduate in fine arts from the University of Oregon, Marcroft has exhibited in group, juried, and solo shows in the Boise Art Museum, various galleries, the Yellowstone Museum and other venues. She has received two grants from the Idaho Commission for the Arts.

Her work seeks to explore “the bond we have with nature and the environment, as well as the effect we humans are having on the planet every single day. How do we address these changes? How can we proceed in a modern world and still show compassion for the environment and the creatures that inhabit it?”

“Field of Vision” can be seen on weekdays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., through June, in the public meeting rooms of the Center for the Humanities, 811 S.W. Jefferson Avenue. For information call: 541-737-2450.
liberal clout... (continued from page 1)

foreground, including many women of color.

While journalists and social scientists have written about some aspects of the subject, said Chappell, she is the first to look closely at the historical roots and significance.

“By the 1970s, the nation’s urban crisis had reached a peak, as older cities bled capital and jobs. In the 1980s, the ‘Reagan Revolution’ undermined support for progressive redistribution, and in the 1990s an economic boom failed to brighten prospects for the working class.”

As economic inequality grew, those on the losing end experimented with creative tactics and offered innovative policy solutions. They drew on history, including the Unemployed Councils and neighborhood organizing of the 1930s and civil rights activism of the 1960s, to confront the problems of postindustrial society.

At the center of ACORN’s agenda was achieving real political power for the poor, and they succeeded on numerous fronts, including living wage ordinances and minimum wage hikes, and, in 2007, a significant increase in the federal minimum wage. The next year, said Chappell, low-income voter participation was crucial in Barack Obama’s presidential victory. ACORN also bucked two key trends in post-1960s liberalism—the replacement of class-based concerns with identity-based politics, and the replacement of grassroots mobilization with single-issue professional advocacy and lobbying.

“In the wake of welfare reform, a newly imagined working class demonstrated its political muscle, won popular support, garnered crucial allies in the Democratic Party, and held out the possibility of a left turn in American politics,” said Chappell.

Even so, historians tend to portray the last third of the 20th century as an era of conservative ascendency, citing such things as market deregulation, regressive taxation, rejection of affirmative action, and disintegration of the political left.

“While these accounts highlight real historical trends, their emphasis on a sharp historical break is inadequate for understanding the complexities of historical and political change... By uncovering a largely invisible history of class-based economic justice activism in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and chronicling pitched battles over neoliberal public policy at the municipal, state, and federal levels, my book will offer a more nuanced picture of political change than current accounts that emphasize the era’s conservative ascendency.”

Marisa Chappell is the author of The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America (2010). On April 18, she will speak at the Center on “Poor People Power: ACORN and Transformation of American Politics.”

bones... (continued from page 3)

eling across time and place, bone collectors told stories of beauty and deformity, crime and punishment, sin and sanctity, science and colonial power, often simultaneously.”

A former Center Research Fellow, Guerrini is the Horning Professor in the Humanities and a professor of history at OSU. She is in residence at the Center as a Sabbatical Fellow. Her most recent book, The Courtiers’ Anatomists, explores animals, anatomy and natural history in the Paris of Louis XIV.

Though well known as a scholar of early vivisection and related topics, Guerrini’s research interests are wide, spanning such diverse areas as the history of ecological restoration, the early modern kitchen as a site for science, and urban animals in early modern Paris and London. The diversity is reflected in the range of funding sources for her work, which have included the National Science Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, the French Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique, and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin.

Guerrini’s current project on the early modern human skeleton is supported by a National Science Foundation award. The project, she said, “will provide a fresh look at the human body during a critical period in the history of science and medicine, and will explode some popular myths, including those surrounding religious attitudes toward dissection.”
Please join us in supporting the Peter J. Copek Fund

For information on how to contribute, please see the Center’s website and click on “Make a gift”
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You may also send a check, made out to the OSU Foundation, Peter J. Copek Fund, to:
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Settersten... (continued from page 3)

The military book, an outgrowth of an NIH-fund ed research network, involves nearly 50 contributors and a variety of data sets that probe the legacies of military service, especially during wartime, for the aging of different cohorts of veterans and their families.

“These analyses have, for example, helped us understand how trauma and stress, coupled with particular coping strategies, affect the morbidity and mortality of aging veterans, the significance of cultural and personal interpretations of war in determining later-life outcomes, and the power of social relationships and networks in risking or protecting the health of veterans as they grow older.”

*American Lives* is based on the parents of the landmark Berkeley Growth and Guidance Studies, which began in the late 1920s. The parents, the bulk of whom were born between 1890 and 1910, straddle the turn of the last century.

“This generation and these data offer a fascinating window into how social change leaves its mark on human lives. Their early lives were punctuated by migration and immigration, and, for some of the older men, World War I. They parented young children during the Great Depression, teenagers during World War II, and launched them at the close of the war. Many had sons who served in Korea.

“What might all of this have to do with today? Many important themes resonate with contemporary women and men, and mothers and fathers—the renegotiation of gender roles inside and outside of the family, the fragile nature of family structure and experience, and the management of significant economic hardship, to name just a few.”

Rick Settersten has held fellowships at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education in Berlin, the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern, and the Spencer Foundation in Chicago.

Peter J. Copek Fund

During Peter J. Copek’s sixteen years as the founding director of the Center, he regularly made Center money available to support cultural events on campus. In addition to conferences, music festivals, and film series, the Center supported many special and unusual lectures and programs, including visits to OSU by Gore Vidal, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and venerable South African township jazz singer and film star Dolly Rathebe. After Peter died suddenly in June, 2001, there was much discussion of how best to keep his name alive so that his impact on OSU intellectual life would not be forgotten. What resulted is the Peter J. Copek Fund, intended to provide more regular and stable support for the same kinds of cultural events that he sponsored through the Center.
WINTER & SPRING CALENDAR

Art Exhibits:
January-March, Facing the Music: Performance Photos by Mina Carson
April-June, Field of Vision, paintings by Kitrina Marcroft

Lectures are at 4 p.m. at Autzen House

February 22
The Keeping Room. Keith Scribner, Center Research Fellow, Writing Faculty, School of Writing, Literature, and Film, OSU.

February 29
An Empire for Freedom: Transcontinental Abolitionism and the Black Civil Rights Struggle in the Pacific West. Stacey Smith, Center Research Fellow, History Faculty, School of History, Philosophy, and Religion, OSU.

March 7
They Might Be Giants: Fossils, Mythology, and National Identity in Early Modern Europe. Anita Guerrini, Sabbatical Fellow, Horning Professor in the Humanities, School of History, Philosophy, and Religion, OSU.

April 11
Muslim Jews: A History of Conversion. Jonathan Katz, Center Research Fellow, History Faculty, School of History, Philosophy, and Religion, OSU.

April 18
Pioneers, Protesters, and Privatizers: Urban Homesteading and American Political Transformation. Marisa Chappell, Center Research Fellow, History Faculty, School of History, Philosophy, and Religion, OSU.

May 16
On Killing and Dying: Affective Histories of World War I Airmen. Janet Lee, Center Research Fellow, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Faculty, School of Language, Culture, and Society, OSU.

Fellowships (continued from page 1)

Nana Osei-Kofi
Women, Gender, & Sexuality
Cultural Production and the Making of an Afroswedish Identity

Kevin Osterloh
History, Philosophy, & Religion
Virtuous Sons of Abraham: Jewish Identity in a Hellenistic World under Rome

Kirsi Peltomaki
History, Philosophy & Religion
Public Knowledge: The Writings of Michael Archer

Mila Zuo
Writing, Literature, and Film
Screening Beauty/Acting Chinese: Chinese Female Stars and Body Politics
The Center for the Humanities
Autzen House
811 S.W. Jefferson Avenue,
Corvallis, OR 97333-4506
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The Center was established in 1984 as an outgrowth of the Humanities Development Program, which had been creating innovative interdisciplinary courses since 1977. The Center’s focus has broadened to a concern for improving the quality of humanities research as well as teaching at OSU. This is accomplished through the awarding of resident research fellowships to OSU scholars as well as by supporting faculty initiatives, and sponsoring conferences, seminars, lecture series, art exhibits and other events. The Center occupies Autzen House, 811 S.W. Jefferson Avenue, Corvallis, OR, 97333.

David Robinson  Wendy Madar  Joy Futrell
Director     Associate Director     Office Coordinator