Fifty years ago was a tumultuous time in America. A spirit of change pulsed throughout the country. Major problems afflicting the country were once again being rediscovered. Poverty and inequality in all their facets – social, political and economic – rose higher and higher on the national agenda.

At the beginning of the 1960s, many Americans – including their leaders – looked at their country and saw what they wanted to see: a Post-World War II America brimming with affluence, a land where poverty – especially the poverty of the Great Depression – had finally been left behind and where everyone who wanted to could participate in the American Dream. Then, in 1962, Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* put the lie to that vision. What he found in his travels was a nation still struggling with deep poverty, some 40 to 50 million poor out of a total population of about 180 million (or 22% to 28%).

Harrington’s book received widespread attention following Dwight Macdonald’s review in the *New Yorker* magazine in January 1963, its influence reaching the Oval Office when President John F. Kennedy received a copy from an adviser.

Poverty has always existed here, but for the most part it is invisible. So is the other side of poverty: the vast inequality that yields immense wealth to the handful at the top
of our society and desperation for the millions and millions who live at the bottom – whether we are talking about 1962 or 2013.

While poverty is more than just economic, that aspect is certainly critical. Those at the bottom in America struggle to pay the rent, to keep food on their tables, to see doctors or get medicine when they and their families are sick, to pay for adequate clothing, etc. Yet being poor means much more. It also means being marginalized, left out of full participation in the life of one’s society. It means being disenfranchised and isolated and excluded. So there are profound social and political faces to poverty as well, concerns that also captured the public imagination 50 years ago.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, ended with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s stirring “I Have a Dream” speech. He not only called for an end to racism in America, but for a country where race could be transcended and where we could all be free and share in the bounty of America, whether black or brown or red or yellow or white. King’s vision was an America where children of all colors could walk and live and play and love together. That was his dream.

Civil and human and political and economic rights all emerged as essential during this era. America needed to change, to abandon its past of racial and gender and class biases and limited opportunities for the many with privilege reserved just for the elite.

It was a time of change, but that change did not come without a price.

We saw police dogs launched at civil rights demonstrators.

We saw four little girls die in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

We saw the Freedom Riders challenge segregation.
We saw more and more American “advisers” deployed to Vietnam.

We saw the JFK and LBJ administrations prop up dictatorships.

We saw fire and smoke rise over Watts and then other American cities, in what some called riots and others called urban insurrections.

We saw a president tell us that men would walk on the moon before the end of the decade.

We saw a Buddhist monk set himself aflame.

We saw the requirement to sign a loyalty oath to get a student loan.

We saw women and children on welfare marching in the streets demanding an adequate social safety net open to everyone.

We saw a president sign the Equal Pay Act.

We saw the murder of Medgar Evers and too many other civil rights activists.

We saw people demanding their right to vote.

We saw young men burning their draft cards.

We saw powerful social movements – for civil rights, for women’s rights, against war, for gay rights late in the decade – begin to emerge. And we saw the resistance of those who wanted everything to stay the same.

But profound changes in American society occurred. Because of the courage of those at the bottom and their allies, political leaders responded – sometimes with repression – including police actions, arrests, and imprisonments – and sometimes with change through legislation and the courts.
After Lyndon Baines Johnson declared “war” on poverty in his 1964 State of the Union address, he took action through the Economic Opportunity Act, which he signed into law later that year. This was one of the most critical aspects of the War on Poverty, because it required the “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” It created local community action agencies which gave the poor a voice in how federal money would be used in the anti-poverty programs located in their neighborhoods. The poor suddenly were not only seen but had to be heard.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed employment discrimination on the basis of race and gender, providing job opportunities that had long been denied to many and new avenues out of poverty.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it possible for many Black Americans to vote for the first time in their lives – a century after the Civil War and the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.


Major decisions by the Supreme Court contributed to human rights as well, including the rights of those accused of crimes.

Fifty years ago was truly a remarkable time.

But it is important to be distrustful of nostalgia, as Stephanie Coontz has so eloquently warned us in *The Way We Never Were*. These were not perfect times, and there were many who fought against the spirit of the times. Tom Brokaw’s “greatest generation” was not as great as he likes to believe. Many were deeply racist and used
their religious beliefs to justify their racism. White Citizens Councils – more “polite” versions of the KKK – were active – and not a lot different in their sentiments from their contemporary counterparts of the Tea Party. Their sexism was also just as rampant and drew on those same traditional religious beliefs. These were people who wanted their world to stay as it was, and they resisted change with all their will. But the spirit of change prevailed.

Unfortunately, it is now fifty years later, and we have lost ground. But major changes in social, political, and economic rights in this country have always been followed by challenges from the wealthy and their lackeys – be it the gains of the Reconstruction era or the Progressive era or the Great Depression era. Just as in their attacks on so-called Obamacare, Republicans have been fighting to get rid of the Social Security Act since its inception in 1935. Just as wealthy bankers now resist regulation, they fought back in the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s against regulations that came out of the Great Depression.

The 1960s were still a time of McCarthyism and oppression, of John Birchers and the KKK and the White Citizens Councils, of reactionary fundamentalist self-proclaimed Christians. Just as we have greed now, we had greed then. In The Lonely Crowd, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney wrote that consumerism and fashion were the driving forces of too many young people – not much different than what we hear about today’s youth. Fifty years ago there was less stuff to have than there is in the 21st century, but the rich and affluent had their gadgets and technology and easy lives then and now – at the expense of what we currently call the 99%.
What we did fifty years ago we can do again – as we continue to do from time to time in this society that lacks a memory, a sense of history. Once again it is time to rediscover poverty and inequality. Let us challenge our current era of austerity and exclusion by demanding that the common good become a national priority once more. Let us not only honor the 50th anniversary of this momentous era but reclaim the spirit of these times.

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