

# History, Politics and Health in Contemporary America

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After two terms of “new patriotism” and chants of “USA: We’re number 1”, Ronald Reagan has attributed his phenomenal popularity with the American public not to the made “promises of Government” but to the real “progress made by people.” Emerging out of the 1970s era of nightmares, the “Reagan Revolution” has put us back on the path to the promised land and given us the opportunity to dream of individual progress again. In the face of Jimmy Carter’s prophecy of “inevitable decline”, Reagan’s dream of individual progress is the creed of the yuppie constitution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. In this paper I argue that it is this dream of individual progress, particularly as connected to everyday concerns of youthfulness, health, exercise and the body, that is at the core of the contemporary quality of life debate.

Today, we live in an era where Jane Fonda has gone from Barberella to barbells; where having the non-fat, non-smoking, Nautilus body has become as prestigious as owning a BMW. It is an era where we drink diet soda, lite beer and eat white meat recipes culled from the diet books that now stock our kitchen libraries. No longer are oat bran, bean sprouts and meditation a counter-culture response to some impending “Apocalypse Now.” Yesterday’s radicalism has become today’s common sense. It is an era of cosmetic surgery, scalpel slaves, personal trainers and lifestyle enhancement courses. Bodies are created or sculptured by design and usually at great cost. It is an era where “Pump up the Volume” is more than just a rock song and “INXS” signifies more than a rock group: Both have become an attitude to life. It is an era where Reebok Inc. spend 820 million to tell us “U.B.U” and to “insist on yourself” and Nike Inc. \$10 million to encourage us to “just do it.” After all, happiness is progress and the latter is “personal productivity growth.” It is an era that says “Welcome to the Pleasure Dome” or, put in less sybaritic terms, welcome to the “Age of Reagan.”

Reagan’s dream of individual progress remains a powerful and popular definer of the current political and cultural scene. It paints an image of the goodlife against a backdrop of the failure of big Government interference in everyday life and the failure of any notion of the Welfare State as an antidote to social inequalities. It is an image of the good life that categorically states that anyone can make it if they are prepared to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” But, it also is an image that is rife with contradictions. For instance, all indicators point to the fact that Americans are not better off than they were a decade ago. Real incomes are down, an economic recession seems inevitable, and the right to dream of progress does not apparently include the right to a home, a job and food to eat. The right to life, as it is presently articulated, seems to begin with conception and end at birth.

Yet, in spite of this, the populism of Reagan remains evident for all to see. My strategy in this paper is to raise a series of questions that will map out the context of contemporary conservative populism. This is the wider frame within which we wish to discuss the health and quality of life debate especially as it is articulated to everyday experiences with exercise, and the pursuit of the youthful body. These latter experiences are vitally important because they are the pieces of the puzzle that define American popular consciousness and thus political and cultural life. We want to argue that current conservative populism cannot be understood unless these pieces are fitted into the puzzle. So mine is an attempt to reconstruct the way in which the puzzle has been put together in a historical sense. I feel this is especially important as it raises a number of issues that I think are of immediate relevance to the fields of physical education, health, and recreation as they move into the 1990s. Whether we like it or not, our own pedagogical and research practices are part of the puzzle as

it has been articulated in the “Age of Reagan.” That we recognize this is imperative because if the “Reagan Revolution” encourages us to dream away our worst nightmares through an ideology of individualism as a whole way of life, then what happens to those nightmares if we are rudely awakened from our dreams. In other words, what does the future hold and what is our place within it?