

## The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism

Robert William Fogel

The fourth great awakening simply didn't happen. Reading about it is still worthwhile.

The Fourth Great Awakening was to be a spiritual revival driven by evangelical Christians in America. Publishing in the year 2000, Vogel saw its spiritual roots in the Reagan revolution and predicted a political realization during the first part of the 21st century.

It didn't happen. As Casey Stengel famously said, "Predictions are hard, especially about the future." Vogel is a very erudite author, and it is worth looking at his predictions and why they didn't come out.

His subtitle is "The Future of Egalitarianism." Egalitarianism has been a leitmotif running through American history, very visible in the three more generally acknowledged Great Awakenings. By his accounting:

The First Great Awakening took place between 1730 and 1830. It operated mostly in the religious realm. It rejected the predestination concept of the Calvinists and the Puritans in favor of a notion that salvation was available to everybody if they worked at it. This was consistent with American society of the time. The frontier was open and anybody who wanted could obtain land, and become relatively prosperous as a farmer. All it took was the virtues of honesty and hard work.

The Second Great Awakening, 1800 to 1920, had to do with personal salvation. The theory was that we were all born equal but some had not achieved their full potential. The social movements were abolition of slavery, temperance – abolition of alcohol, and women's suffrage. The objective was equality of opportunity. The belief remained that different people will achieve different levels of success due to differences in their innate nature, but that everybody should have an equal opportunity at the start.

The Third Great Awakening, 1890 and onward, was best characterized by the "Social Gospel" philosophy. This put responsibility for the success of members of society not on the individuals but on society itself. The theory was that people could be born into circumstances that they did not have the individual strength to overcome. This was a philosophy behind the welfare state introduced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Note that it was also the communist philosophy – people could not do it on their own, they needed a government to look out for their interests. The enemies of this time were the robber barons, the powerful trusts and corporations. At this time as well the mainstream churches atrophied, as government took over more of the social burdens – reform and welfare – that had occupied the mainstream Protestant churches in the second great awakening.

The Fourth Great Awakening, 1960 and onward, in his words represents "return to sensuous religion and reassertion of experiential content of the Bible; reassertion of the concept of personal sin." Politically, he projected that it was an "attack on materialistic corruption, and the rise of pro-life, profamily, and media reform movements." The year 2000 may have marked the high watermark of such a movement. It existed, but it never became politically dominant and has lost steam since.

Instead of the evangelicals seizing control, other powers, notably the neoconservatives, took control of the supposedly conservative Republican Party and steered their own agenda. This agenda included support for Israel, which was supported by the evangelicals for religious purposes. It included the "war on terror" which was supported more or less by the same group. However, the millennial children of the evangelicals simply did not have the same fervor as their parents. Moreover, they are not as many of them. They never achieved much political power. Bush, and especially Obama, have flooded the country with immigrants who definitely do not gravitate toward evangelical Christianity and traditional American values. In summary, the Fourth Great Awakening died aborning.

Vogel saw an America that was rich enough to change its focus from material to spiritual well-being. He correctly saw an existential crisis – people's lives were increasingly devoid of meaning. However, the growing gap between the rich and the poor meant that incomes were stagnating and material concerns remained uppermost. It is true that America has problems with drugs and alcohol, unemployment, under education and random youth violence. However, the major political concern has remained one of income redistribution.

The book has some good and prescient observations about the effect of technology on the workplace. It is an early observation that technology is making less skilled workers obsolete. Vogel's naïve solution is more education. This has been tried and it simply doesn't work. Most people are not able to absorb more education, and simply lack the intelligence to put it to good use. The world could certainly use more engineers, but there simply are not enough people with the talent required to become engineers.

A four-star book. It was an honest, earnest effort by a very wise man, but he was not gifted with the ability to see the future. None of us are.