

Creating the New Right Ethnic in 1970s America: The Intersection of Anger and Nostalgia, by Richard Moss, Teaneck, N.J., Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017, 246 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-61147-935-5

Scholarship of the 'white ethnic' phenomenon of the 1970s has been at an impasse, caught between images of kitsch 'Kiss Me I'm Italian' buttons or reactionary urban whites hostile to racial change. Richard Moss's *Creating the New Right Ethnic* attempts to bridge these two interpretations, illustrating the interplay between culture and politics, nostalgia and resentment, in the construction of the 'New Ethnicity' and a new cultural politics integral to contemporary American conservatism.

Creating the New Right Ethnic captures the heterogeneity of the white ethnic movement and the conflicting, often contradictory, voices within it. It introduces us to college professors, street vigilantes, civil rights organisers and activist priests; it takes us from fractious meetings in high school gyms to White House breakfasts; it analyses academic treatises and National Book Award winners alongside TV cop shows and mass-market magazines for aspirational suburbanites. Yet each voice contributed to a single end; the construction of a new ethnic identity, performative rather than private, symbolic not substantive, often populist, blue-collar and masculine. Such an identity transcended Clifford Geertz's 'primordial' signifiers of ethnicity – nationality, language, social custom or tradition – instead emphasising amorphous values or tropes (thus Michael Novak, chief ideologue of the movement, could identify Ronald Reagan as 'ethnic'). The end product was a 'new ethnic paradigm' (p. 26) that promoted narrow cultural resentments over socio-economic reform, racial binaries and rigid, exclusive identities over ethnic pluralism and intergroup cooperation, and an 'authentic' collective memory of individual sacrifice and self-help above collective organisation and state assistance. This identity, it concludes, has since been

appropriated by the conservative Right to perpetuate racial division, restore traditional gender roles, weaken labour unions and dismantle social welfare provision.

Where *Creating the New Right Ethnic* excels is in its exposition of the dynamic and constructible quality of ethnicity, and its regular and active reinvention. For Moss, ethnicity was a flexible ‘style’, ‘symbol’ (xv) or ‘lifestyle’ (79), described by Novak in 1975 as ‘[growing] out of personal experience’ (Novak, ‘The New Ethnicity’, *Center* 7 (Jul-Aug 1974), 18-25). His critique of the construction of white ethnicity by public intellectuals such as Novak or Richard Gambino – the latter using a brief ‘roots trip’ to Italy to construct a generalised vision of Italian American identity and ‘basic values’ (86) for public consumption – is particularly effective, as is the easy synergy he identifies between these nostalgic, often defensive paeans to ethnic earthiness and authenticity and those subsequently offered by conservative politicians. This conceptualisation of ethnicity, drawn from literature and sociology, as values or symbols, and thus its potential appropriation across a variety of contexts and by a variety of actors, is a welcome and insightful contribution to a field which has often collapsed white ethnicity into a rigid, uniform whiteness.

Yet despite its claim to offer a reading of ethnicity which is context-specific, *Creating the New Right Ethnic* does not always convincingly situate its subject within the context of the 1970s. Early on, Moss argues that the movement served as ‘a means of responding to the tensions of the 1970s’ (x), yet what those tensions were is not always clear. Outside of a rather generic exposition of a ‘cultural crisis’ (69) the exogenous conditions or structures of the 1970s which scaffolded and supported new political alternatives such as the white ethnics – and which, by the end of the decade, often diminished their legitimacy – are not evident. More explicit contextualisation of the white ethnics within the decline of working-class politics, the rights revolution, dwindling religious worship or transformations in urban space or political economy during the 1970s would add depth to the book.

Despite its stated effort to disrupt our ‘reflexive association’ (x) of white ethnicity with racial conservatism and reactionary populism – in particular by uncovering its early attempts to forge class-based, multiracial coalitions such as Gary’s Calumet Community Congress – the book’s narrative arc largely reinforces this link. The progressive impulses and, in some cases, breakthroughs represented by activists such as Baroni or the American Jewish Committee’s Irving Levine, and their acquisition of financial and rhetorical support from liberal institutions such as the Ford Foundation or the Carter White House, are dismissed or downplayed. While it highlights Novak’s admiration for Nixon’s 1972 re-election campaign’s utilisation of ethnic symbolism, his enlistment by and counsel to the rival campaign of liberal Democrat George McGovern is ignored. The progressive contribution of white ethnic organisations such as the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs to processes of urban neighbourhood renewal or reinvestment – for instance through the passage of the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act – are overlooked. While *Creating the New Right Ethnic* sets out to represent a ‘disjointed, inconsistent and difficult to define’ movement (x) whose shift to the right was ‘not preordained’ (xii), it often reinforces a narrative of white ethnic backlash, obstructionism and political realignment which remains difficult to shift.

Finally, *Creating the New Right Ethnic* remains, like many studies of the white ethnic politics of the 1970s, a top-down story. This approach is understandable – for Moss, the construction of the New Right ethnic was an elite project – but the experiences and agency of ordinary urban ethnic communities, many of which fed into this process of construction, remain elusive, or at best generalised. How, if at all, did the white ethnic movement and its related images and tropes function at the grassroots? How did local ethnic communities understand, consume or engage with ethnicity by the 1970s? How did generational, regional, spatial, or socio-economic cleavages influence the construction and reception of white ethnic politics or cultural production? Many accounts of the white ethnic movement have failed to

provide satisfactory answers to these questions, and failed to incorporate local contexts, constituencies and divisions within their analyses. *Creating the New Right Ethnic* does not overcome this wider shortcoming.

Creating the New Right Ethnic has much to offer scholars of both ethnicity and modern conservatism. It provides a more complex, fluid and ultimately valuable conceptualisation of the white ethnics, and ethnicity, than is provided in much of the existing historiography. Yet the extent to which it moves the terms of debate on from their existing foundations – perhaps by incorporating local voices and experiences, or by excavating the differences within seemingly homogenous communities – remains questionable.

Joe Merton

University of Nottingham

joe.merton@nottingham.ac.uk

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