

Book Reviews

White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics.

By Joshua M. Zeitz.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

278 pages.

Joshua M. Zeitz's *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics* has received several favorable reviews since its publication in 2007. Most reviewers have praised Zeitz's attempt to demonstrate that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal coalition fractured much earlier than many historians have stated. Zeitz does effectively show that whites responded in diverse and often troubling ways to racial change, and, in doing so, he demonstrates that the New Deal coalition was in tatters well before the 1960s. However enlightening this may be, Zeitz's work lacks the subtlety and depth that one expects from a work purporting to focus solely on New York City's white ethnic subcultures in the postwar period. In fact, *White Ethnic New York* leaves the reader wondering exactly where ethnicity fits into Zeitz's depiction of white New York.

As the subtitle to Zeitz's book suggests, his primary focus is not on the Jews, Italians, and Irish as ethnic actors, but as religious ones. Zeitz neatly lumps New York's white ethnics into two rigid groups: the liberal Jews and their conservative counterparts, the Roman Catholics. While Zeitz's treatment of Jewish politics and culture is comprehensive, his discussion of the ethnic identity of the Italian Americans and the Irish Americans is marred by his attempt to demonstrate that their Catholicism became a uniform and overarching bond. Zeitz hangs his claims of Catholic uniformity on parochial school enrollment figures, numbers that grew steadily in the postwar decades. According to Zeitz, the growth in Catholic school attendance demonstrated a rejection of the characteristics of individual Catholic subcultures and a uniform acceptance of, and dedication to, Catholic doctrine.

This evidence, while interesting, does little to explain the differences that existed between Catholics: For example, why did Italian Americans still lag behind the Irish Americans in both parochial school and college attendance and in moving into white collar jobs? Surely ethnic identity and ethnic subcultures continued to separate one group of Catholics from another. Zeitz's depiction of Roman Catholicism also ignores the fact that Italian Americans had deeply rooted anticlerical sentiments, which undoubtedly colored the way in which they responded to Roman Catholic officials on whose voices Zeitz heavily relies. Also, for many Italian Americans, national parishes and saints' days still played an important role in their lives, perhaps not on a religious level, but as cultural centers and celebrations of their ethnicity. If Zeitz is to be believed, then there is no continuity between New York's prewar white ethnic subcultures and the New Ethnic movement. Following Zeitz's reasoning, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Italian Americans and Irish Americans simply emerged, fully formed, from a miasma of truly catholic Catholicism.

Zeitz treats the Roman Catholics solely as religious actors, wed to and guided by their priests' sermons and religious publications and defined only by their church

attendance. New York's Jews, on the other hand, receive a much more evenhanded treatment as an ethnic group. Zeitz demonstrates that New York's Jewish community was a cultural, rather than religious, community. According to Zeitz, Jews rarely attended synagogue or sent their children to Hebrew school. Therefore, Zeitz is forced to examine Jewish liberalism not as a religious phenomenon but as a cultural one. These actors are not *Jews*; they are *Jewish Americans*, in much the same way that the Catholics that Zeitz defines as one solid bloc are Italian Americans or Irish Americans.

In his attempt to create an overarching view of Catholics as political conservatives, Zeitz underplays the roles of such key liberal figures such as leftist U.S. Representative Vito Marcantonio (East Harlem). Zeitz attributes Marcantonio's political success entirely to identity politics, stating that his election was based on his Italianness, rather than any true commitment by his supporters to liberal politics. In ignoring Marcantonio's political successes and Italian-American liberalism in general, Zeitz misses an important opportunity to complicate his thesis. Instead of examining the continual subcurrent of liberal players in the Italian-American and Irish-American communities, in Zeitz's view, Catholic liberal voices emerge only as a result of the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. This stance is problematic to say the least, since it depicts Vatican II as the agent of change within the Church, rather than the result of changes that had already occurred at the grass-roots level.

Also absent from Zeitz's analysis is an explanation of exactly how social class figured into defining the views of white ethnics. Did Jews become more liberal as they moved into the middle class? Did Italian Americans remain conservative because they remained in the working class? Again, Zeitz misses a chance to move beyond the rigid religious definitions that he has created. Class differences remain an unwritten undercurrent, one that is noticeably absent particularly from a discussion of New York's political scene, especially in the 1960s. Zeitz, for example, does not show that working-class Jewish Americans often voted for the same candidates as working-class Italian Americans, as they did in the 1969 New York City Democratic mayoral primary, nor does he attempt to explain any breakdown in political beliefs according to class lines.

While *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics* is lacking in many respects, it should not be dismissed entirely. Zeitz has provided a foundation for any scholar who truly wishes to delve into the complexity of New York's white ethnic political subcultures. Those scholars need only complicate and add subtle analysis to the groundwork Zeitz has established.

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