

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

Historians have struggled to upend a popular and scholarly narrative of the white ethnic phenomenon of the 1970s which foregrounds images of angry urban white reactionaries at the expense of progressive campaigns for socio-economic justice and visions of a heterogeneous, culturally pluralistic Americanism. Richard Moss's impressively wide-ranging study of the construction of white ethnicity during the decade excavates the reasons for this narrative's ascendancy whilst attempting to disrupt our "reflexive association" (p. x) of white ethnicity with racial conservatism and reactionary populism. Yet the net impact of the book is to reinforce such an association, leaving our conventional understanding of the white ethnics relatively undisturbed.

One of the book's major contributions is to emphasise that the construction of the white ethnic identity was an active, creative process, reflecting ethnicity's inherently constructible quality. In contrast to much of the existing historiography on white ethnicity and the conservative Right, Moss conveys the agency of ethnics themselves in the creation of this new politics. Indeed, from college professors to mobsters, community organizers and civil rights activists to magazine publishers and Republican strategists, a range of contradictory and often conflicting voices – mainstream and countercultural, progressive and conservative, Catholic and Jewish – actively articulated a distinct ethnicity in response to what Moss describes, a little evasively, as "the tensions of the 1970s" (p. x). Each consolidated, consciously or otherwise, a "new ethnic paradigm" (p. 26) which was performative rather than private, symbolic not substantive, exclusive rather than inclusive, and presented

ethnicity as a series of values or experiences rather than rooted in language, national origin or religion. The paradigm celebrated an ‘authentic’ yet mythical ethnic identity which was tough (i.e. self-reliant), masculine, blue-collar, anti-modern, and white. But in privileging ethnics’ cultural resentments and anxieties over their socio-economic needs, it would prove valuable material for the ascendant Right and its attempts to roll back the state and social welfare provision, restore traditional gender roles and sow racial division in the 1970s and beyond. It has since also, Moss concludes, echoing similar arguments in Matthew Jacobson’s *Roots Too*, created a “simple yardstick” (p. xvii) by which to measure the progress of other minority groups in the United States, further entrenching the racial binaries and inequalities the more progressive elements of the white ethnic movement hoped to overturn.

The scope of Moss’s study is impressive, taking us from the street-level activism of Rabbi Meir Kahane and the Italian American Civil Rights League’s Joseph Colombo in chapter 2 to national election campaigns in chapter 6, with detours through ethnicity’s construction in academic treatises, popular cultural representations and progressive activism. In each case the same ethnic paradigm was perpetuated and created, with an elitist, materialistic and above all “rootless” WASP superculture (to use ethnic ideologue Michael Novak’s terminology) as its foil. The range of sources is also impressive, with Moss equally comfortable discussing cultural texts, public policy documents or political discourse across the book. Chapter 3’s dissection of the nostalgic, often defensive paeans to ethnic authenticity, earthiness and outsiderdom in the work of intellectuals such as Novak, Howe and Richard Gambino, and their fusion with the tropes of the conservative Right outlined in chapter 6, is a highlight.

Moss could be more precise about the agency of ethnic Americans in this process of identity construction. In chapter 5's discussion of popular cultural representations of the New Ethnicity the role ethnics themselves played in the development of film, TV shows or mass-market magazines, or cultural protagonists such as Rocky Balboa, is unclear. How did ordinary ethnic communities help shape, digest or engage with these creations? Were ethnics producers or consumers? Likewise, chapter 2's analysis of the working-class origins of the New Ethnicity, in which the cultural populism and performative ethnicity of Kahane and Colombo are aligned with the national conservative populism of Spiro Agnew and George Wallace, it is unclear where agency lies. Did ethnic leaders respond to the political culture created by the emergent populist Right or did these national figures respond to them?

Most significantly, despite Moss's intention to challenge our understanding of the white ethnics as the "hyper-masculine, racist vanguard of the era's conservative ascendancy" (p. ix), his study largely fails to overturn these tropes. Moss opts not to acknowledge the progressive contributions of Geno Baroni and the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs to urban neighbourhood renewal through the passage of the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act and Urban Development Action Grants or its support of the National Housing Conference (later National People's Action). His choice of Gary's short-lived Calumet Community Congress as an example of the limits of progressive white ethnic activism and interracial coalition-building at the grassroots, rather than the more successful and enduring Buckeye-Woodland Community Congress in Cleveland, Baltimore's Southeast Community Organization or Stephen Aduato's North Ward Center in Newark, is another example of this shortcoming. Greater attentiveness to the less visceral examples of white ethnic activism, from funding applications to neighbourhood coalition-building, or greater endeavour amongst

local archives rather than the national press, might be necessary to deliver the kind of historiographical reorientation Moss sets out to achieve.

Joe Merton

University of Nottingham

joe.merton@nottingham.ac.uk

843 words