

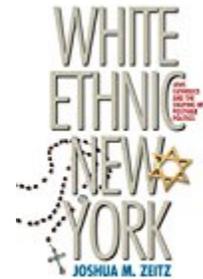
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Joshua M. Zeitz. *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xiii + 278 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5798-4; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3095-6.

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In *White Ethnic New York*, Joshua Zeitz provides a valuable and provocative exploration of Jewish and Catholic political culture in New York City in the post-World War II era. Although scholars during the 1940s and 1950s heralded the end of ethnicity, Zeitz persuasively argues that, in fact, Jewish and Catholic ethnicity continued to have substantial meaning in individuals' lives—both social and political—throughout the postwar years.

In his excellent first chapter, "Communities," for example, Zeitz uses compelling statistical and demographic data, as well as oral histories and memoirs, to demonstrate that white ethnic neighborhoods in the outer boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens during the 1950s and 1960s may actually have been denser and more insular than fabled immigrant neighborhoods like the Lower East Side: "I spoke not a word of English when I started school.... I lived in a claustrophobically Italian neighborhood, everyone I knew spoke only Italian, so it was natural that I didn't know English," he quotes one memoirist who grew up in Brooklyn in the 1940s and 1950s (p. 17). Workplaces and schools, Zeitz argues, similarly segregated Jews, Irish, and Italians. The persistence of craft unions, for example, rather than the broad-based industrial CIO, in New York City meant that the city's workplaces remained relatively segregated even into the postwar years. And the segregation between Jews and Catholics at work was heightened by the large percentage of second-generation Jews who were able to attain white-collar work (75 percent), as well as self-employment (33 percent)—no more than 5 percent of Catholics were self-employed during this era (pp. 20-21). Finally, the enthusiasm of Jews for the secular public school system, and of Catholics—particularly

Irish Catholics—for private Catholic schools further exacerbated white ethnic divisions in New York City, not only physically segregating children, but also communicating different messages to them.

The crux of Zeitz's argument lies in the different messages communicated by secular public schools and private Catholic schools: educational (and religious) differences, he believes, shaped the very different political ideologies that emerged in Jewish and Catholic ethnic subcultures in postwar New York City. In the second and third chapters of *White Ethnic New York*, he compares the progressive educational philosophy that stressed child-centered learning, democratic values, and permissiveness in the secular public schools with the more traditional philosophy of Catholic schools, which stressed duty, obedience, and hierarchy. These educational philosophies were consonant with substantial reinterpretations of Catholicism and Judaism that were taking place in the postwar era and that were reflected in rabbinical sermons, Catholic newspapers, and clergy pronouncements. While American Jews had begun in the era of mass migration (1880-1924) to reinterpret their religion as one that valued dissent, argumentation, and challenging authority, Catholics were part of a century-long worldwide trend towards restructuring the Catholic Church along stricter, more hierarchical lines. It is difficult to know how much these religious sermons and clergy pronouncements actually mattered in the actual lives of Jews and Catholics; Zeitz offers a few impressionistic accounts of individuals shaped by the ideology of High Holy Day sermons and Catholic school lessons, but he admits that there were many Jews and Catholics whose behavior was not at all shaped by these religious pronouncements. As a result, Zeitz's descriptions of Jew-

ish and Catholic thought verge toward the stereotypical at times. Nonetheless, by emphasizing the historical context in which Jewish and Catholic religious beliefs were being reinterpreted during this era, Zeitz rightly encourages historians to think more closely about the significance of religious ideology in American ethnicity.

In his fourth and fifth chapters, Zeitz attempts to make connections between changing religious interpretations and political ideology. Jews, he argues, were more sensitive to the possibilities of reemerging fascism, more opposed to Joseph McCarthy and the anticommunism of the 1950s, and more supportive of liberalism because of their emphasis upon dissent and their skepticism of authority. With their emphasis upon duty, hierarchy, and obedience, on the other hand, Catholics tended to value family, faith, and nation. Communism was a vital threat to all three, and thus appeared to Catholics the overwhelming enemy in the postwar era, leading them to support McCarthy and distrust liberalism because liberals seemed too supportive of the Popular Front and thus incapable of understanding the threat of communism. Zeitz does note that there were important exceptions to these religious and political ideologies. Jews, for example, were strong anticommunists, he notes, because communism threatened individual rights. Similarly, he offers an extremely valuable discussion of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) as a key text that grounded Catholic political thinking not only on duty, hierarchy, and obedience, but also communal obligations to the poor and criticism of capitalism's excesses (pp. 117-118). Nonetheless, Zeitz does not address in detail the political consequences of these significant philosophical exceptions to his overarching argument, giving short shrift, for example, to the substantial anticommunism and red-baiting that existed throughout the organized Jewish community, as well as to the prominence of Catholic progressives, such as Dorothy Day and the Berrigan brothers, in postwar radicalism.

The initial five chapters of *White Ethnic New York* may thus at times overstate a bit, but they also offer a fascinating, spirited, and much-needed argument for the significance of ethnicity in the late twentieth century. Unfortunately, the second half of the book is a bit less successful and less spirited than the first half. Zeitz becomes caught up in narratives of New York City political history, devoting extraordinary attention to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict in a sixth chapter on race, for example, without actually contributing much of substance to his argument at all. He seems to become embroiled with the problem of what happened during the conflict, rather

than using the conflict to help him understand Jewish and Catholic subcultures. Indeed, his conclusions at the end of the chapter on race—that Jews and Catholics were united in their discomfort with the pace of civil rights activism in the late 1960s—do not help him to develop his broader argument. His seventh chapter on “Reaction,” while perhaps more in tune with his broader argument, is no easier to read: the chapter gets lost in the intricacies of political machination during the mayoral campaigns of John V. Lindsay. Although the chapter's conclusion—that Catholics were turned off by Lindsay's liberal image, while Jews were ultimately persuaded to vote for the mayor, despite anti-Jewish gaffes—does indeed square with Zeitz's position, the author's devotion to electoral minutiae overwhelms the reader and detracts from the book's readability, as well as its argument. The book's eighth chapter, “Upheaval,” does a better job of suggesting that youth rebellion at Fordham University in the 1960s created generational conflict among traditional Catholic parents and their radical children, while the takeover at Columbia University united Jewish parents and children on the left. Nonetheless, altogether, these rebellions suggest a broader rejection of the New Deal coalition among white middle-class students, rather than the continuing salience of ethnicity in urban politics. Zeitz is simply not always able to take the ideological structures and tight thesis he advances at the beginning of his book and map them neatly onto the messy realities of city politics.

Despite these complaints, Zeitz is successful in achieving his goal—to demonstrate the ways that Catholic and Jewish political subcultures throughout the postwar era remained distinctly ethnic, contributing to an early breakdown of the New Deal coalition with a growth of grassroots radicalism on one hand and grassroots conservatism on the other hand. Like other recent historians, such as Lisa McGirr, who have argued that modern conservatism was not impelled solely by a racist backlash against the 1960s civil rights movement, Zeitz is able to uncover more complexity and depth in postwar conservative politics than earlier historians acknowledged.[1] To be sure, Zeitz does note—and indeed he spends a good deal of time addressing—the ways that race shaped white ethnic New Yorkers in the years after World War II. Indeed, portraits of white ethnic conservatives in the 1960s as racists with axes to grind emerge from the pages of *White Ethnic New York* with surprising frequency. These portraits might seem better suited to a text like Jonathan Rieder's *Canarsie* (1985), which emphasized the backlash of the 1960s. But Zeitz rightly tempers these portraits

with an emphasis on the fact that Jews remained a part of the New Deal coalition in the 1960s and 1970s, while Catholics began to abandon the coalition in local politics in the 1940s. He thus adds to a growing body of literature that complicates our understanding of the rise of conservatism after World War II.

There are other ways, too, that Zeitz's book offers us a perspective into the postwar era that is complex and fresh, dovetailing with a number of historians' new understandings of the era. Along with a growing number of historians, such as Lawrence Baron, Rona Sheramy, and Hasia Diner, he offers significant evidence that the Nazi genocide of six million Jews affected the American Jewish population during the 1940s and 1950s, not just in the 1960s, as traditional historical literature previously argued.[2] Zeitz also pays important attention to the regional, ethnic, class and religious dimensions of white radicalism in the 1960s, a subject that has traditionally been overlooked, but is now being considered by scholars like Douglas Rossinow and Michael Staub. Zeitz offers an important contribution to this growing trend.[3]

Perhaps the most important success of *White Ethnic New York* is to push historians to consider the salience of ethnicity in the post-World War II era. Much of the most recent and influential historical literature on white ethnic Americans, such as Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) and David Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness* (2005), has tended to reject the political significance of ethnicity and to emphasize instead the significance of "whiteness," analyzing the ways that the privilege of having white skin shaped European immigrants' experiences in the United States. Although some historians have described somewhat different trajectories of the transition of European immigrants from "Poles" or "Italians" to "whites," they have all generally suggested that World War II was the end point, the mo-

ment when the racial division between black and white came to supersede all other possible racial identities for European immigrants. Even recent works that have sought to complicate the narrative of whiteness, such as Eric Goldstein's excellent book, *The Price of Whiteness* (2006), have used World War II as a date that marked the end of ethnic distinctiveness (for American Jews, in Goldstein's case). Although he does not disagree with the general argument of "whiteness" scholars, Zeitz's book importantly points out that whiteness did not arrive immediately in the wake of World War II, and instead urges us to pay attention to the ways that ethnicity continued to have real meaning in people's social and political lives in the post-World War II era. For that reason above all others, *White Ethnic New York* is an important and valuable text for scholars of ethnicity and race in the twentieth century.

Notes

[1]. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2]. Lawrence Baron, "The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945-1960," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 62-88; Rona Sheramy, "'Resistance and War': The Holocaust in American Jewish Education, 1945-1960," *American Jewish History* 91, no. 2 (2003): 287-313; and Hasia Diner, "Post-World-War-II American Jewry and the Confrontation with Catastrophe," *American Jewish History* 91, nos. 3-4 (2003): 439-467.

[3]. Douglas Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Michael Staub, *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

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