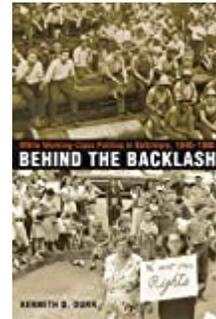




Kenneth D. Durr. *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. ix + 284 pp. ISBN 978-0-8078-5433-4; ISBN 978-0-8078-2764-2.



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“We Want Our Rights!”

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A quarter of a century has passed since Stephan Thernstrom wrote his opus on class and economics in urban America. So too the years have passed since Paula Fass superbly demonstrated that well-chosen statistics, narrative verve, and fascinating cultural history did not have to be strangers to one another. Both historians set a standard in their respective areas of expertise that few have matched. Even more rare has been a scholar capable of merging American class, cultural, political, and urban history into a brilliantly written tome—until now. With the publication of *Behind the Backlash*, Kenneth Durr has joined the lonely ranks of Thernstrom and Fass.[1]

There have been in recent years a number of academic studies focusing on a single city, typically spanning a decade or two, and emphasizing race relations and politics, religion and labor, or some such combination. The most outstanding scholars of this genre have been Vincent Cannato, Gerald Gamm, and Thomas Sugrue. In the twentieth-century urban history literature, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, and New York have received their due, and even Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have had

their mournful bards.[2]

By selecting Baltimore, Durr has given a neglected city the attention it deserves. But there is more at work here than just mining fresh ore. Unlike many other urban locales where recent southern black migrants battled—figuratively and sometimes literally—with “white ethnics,” meaning working-class Roman Catholics, Baltimore has the nearly unique virtue in post-World War II America of having all the constituencies of the New Deal electoral coalition slamming each other. Southern whites, transplanted southern blacks, Roman Catholics, Jews, union members, and crusading middle-class professionals and intellectuals played on a crowded stage—bearing witness that the New Deal Democratic Party often functioned most smoothly when its rank and file loyalists seldom interacted with one another.

As one of America’s oldest port cities, home of the first Roman Catholic diocese in the U.S. and inspiration for the “Star Spangled Banner,” Baltimore by 1940 was gritty, crowded, and tired. With population and manufacturing data in hand, Durr’s prose makes vivid a city that was already in economic crisis years before most

Americans bandied about the term “post-industrial society.”

The boom times of World War II, which helped accelerate southern white and black migration into Baltimore, would not last, leaving recent arrivals and the children of Italian and Polish immigrants contending with one another over disappearing manufacturing jobs and probing neighborhood boundaries in search of decent housing. Though ideologically committed to racial integration of the work place, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) at the local level often permitted cultural sensibilities to trump the politics of long-term coalition building. And for all that it was still far easier to integrate the work place than the neighborhood. When “a home is a man’s castle,” proletarians can become capitalists. Resentment against court-ordered civil rights initiatives and mounting property taxes to support a growing public sector—often seen as catering to the minority poor—would follow.

Durr tackles forthrightly the issue of “block-busting,” whereby scheming realtors targeted neighborhoods for integration and then fed racial fears in order to undermine property values which they could pick up for a song. Many working-class whites reacted badly and declining home prices became a self-fulfilling prophecy as well as a cause of resentment. Then again, as Durr observes, while Jewish neighborhoods were more open to racial integration than Catholic communities, Jews were also the first to flee to leafier locales. The process was the same in 1950s Buffalo and Boston, frequently leading to Democratic Jews and Catholics trading charges of hypocrisy and racism.

As Durr works his way through World War II, the Cold War, the 1960s, and the dispiriting 1970s, one is startled to see how many major political stars flamed out over the skies of Baltimore and Maryland. Senator Milard Tydings met his political end at the hands of Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy, Owen Lattimore went from obscure academic to alleged Kremlin spy, Whittaker Chambers received absolution from Richard Nixon, Alabama governor George Wallace fanned segregationist fires in three separate election cycles, Fathers Philip and Daniel Berrigan torched draft board files, and Spiro Agnew developed a fondness for bribes that followed him from the Baltimore County executive’s office to the vice presidency of the United States. In light of Durr’s account, it is time to update General Diaz’s lamentation: “Poor Baltimore; so far from God and so close to Washington.”

There is no question that the most colorful and significant political player Durr discusses is Mayor Thomas D’Alessandro, Jr. (1947-1959). A socially conservative Catholic New Dealer who tried to bridge the growing post-war divisions among Baltimore Democrats, D’Alessandro famously had little patience for pompous journalists. Once, at a press conference, a reporter stated that his “desk” wanted to know what D’Alessandro was going to do about a particular issue before him. Without a word D’Alessandro put his ear to his desk and then, lifting his head, said, “My desk tells your desk to go f-itself.” To appreciate how far the Democratic Party has come from its earthy New Deal roots one has only to note that D’Alessandro’s daughter is the socially liberal House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a strong advocate of abortion rights.

Ultimately, the best testimony a teacher can offer about a book comes from the students who are assigned to read it. Post-Boomer undergraduates in my Cold War America and 1960s courses have been uniformly enthusiastic about Durr’s work. They appreciate his copious research, fascinating narrative, and insightful analysis. Then again such students are overwhelmingly working-class whites that seem to empathize with their historical counterparts. Some of my graduate students, particularly those who were student activists in the 1960s, however, contend that Durr lets working-class whites off too easily and that they should be held accountable for the sins of racism. Paradoxically, Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke (1987-1989), a one-time champion of the Black Panthers, might now be more charitable than my graduate students. After facing the rigors of holding political office and running a school system in the face of mounting crime rates and a declining tax base, Schmoke has made the journey to the conservative Manhattan Institute in New York to embrace school choice. D’Alessandro would have understood.

Notes

[1]. Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

[2]. Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Kenneth J. Heine-man, *A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depres-*

sion Pittsburgh (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999); Kenneth J. Heineman, "Model City: The War on Poverty, Race Relations, and Catholic Social Activism in 1960s Pittsburgh," *The Historian* 65 (Summer 2003): pp. 867-900; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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