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URBAN POLITICS

The City Liberal, Progressive, and Conservative

Stella M. Capek and John I. Gilderbloom, *Community Versus Commodity: Tenants and the American City* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 326 pp., \$19.95 (paper).

Richard Edward DeLeon, *Left Coast City: Progressive Politics in San Francisco, 1975-1991* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 239 pp., \$14.95 (paper).

Chris McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 403 pp., \$29.95 (cloth).

John Hull Mollenkopf, *A Phoenix in the Ashes: The Rise and Fall of the Koch Coalition in New York City Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 285 pp., \$35.00 (cloth).

The decade of the 1980s was an era of conservative national politics. The ascendancy of conservative politics was represented by the Republican Reagan-Bush administration (1980-1988) and the resounding defeats of Democrats in three consecutive presidential elections. Incumbent Jimmy Carter, himself a relatively conservative Democrat, was defeated in 1980 (after he had routed liberal challenger Senator Ted Kennedy in the Democratic primary campaign). Former Vice President Walter Mondale was defeated in 1984, and Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis was defeated in 1988.

The banner holder for liberal/progressive politics at the national level in Democratic politics was Jesse Jackson. Although Jackson was defeated in both the 1984 and 1988 Democratic presidential primary campaigns, he was a reminder of the presence of a strong liberal wing in a less liberal national

Democratic party (which, in 1992, nominated and elected “New Democrat” Bill Clinton, who espoused “moderate” views on many policy issues).

In this climate, many liberal and progressive political activists saw local politics—primarily municipal rather than state—as the only viable avenue for seriously contesting for political power through the electoral process. Their hopes were buoyed by the election of liberal mayors in major cities: George Moscone in San Francisco in 1975 and, in 1983, Ray Flynn in Boston and Harold Washington in Chicago. Unfortunately, Moscone was assassinated in 1978, and Harold Washington died in office in 1987 (Clavel and Wiewel 1991). Flynn resigned in 1993 after a decade in office to become the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

Liberal and progressive candidates have not generally enjoyed great success in recent municipal politics. In elections in 1993, Michael Woo, a liberal city council member, was defeated by Frank Riordan, a conservative Republican lawyer, in the race to succeed Tom Bradley as mayor of Los Angeles; a Republican was elected mayor in Jersey City, which formerly had been an example of urban Democratic liberalism in New Jersey; the progressive mayor of Burlington, Vermont (the successor to Bernie Sanders, who is currently the only member of the U.S. Congress who is an independent social democrat) lost to a Republican challenger; and New York City’s first African-American mayor, David Dinkins, was narrowly defeated by Republican Rudolph Giuliani.

Four recent books provide an interesting mosaic on this issue featuring four cities: Houston, New York, San Francisco, and Santa Monica. Two of them deal with the fascinating and unique politics of the nation’s largest city: New York.

Chris McNickle chronicles the ethnic bases of politics in New York City over more than a century. His historical review begins with the election of New York’s first Irish mayor in 1880, when the Tammany Hall Democratic machine held sway, and ends with the election of Dinkins in 1989. McNickle describes the rise, and then the decline, of the political influence of the Irish and Italians and the more recent rise of the influence of Jews, blacks, and Hispanics. His basic argument is that ethnic identity remains an enduring factor in electoral politics in New York City, in addition to such other factors as party identity, candidates’ access to funding, and media coverage and endorsements.

In analyzing the city’s byzantine and colorful politics, McNickle explains the crucial roles often played by what is unique to New York and makes it resemble many Western European cities: alternative minority political parties. Examples include the American Labor Party (which was formed in 1936 by Jewish socialist labor leaders to support Roosevelt and the New Deal and

was disbanded after the 1948 Wallace campaign when it was red-baited as a Communist front and deserted by the labor unions), the Liberal party (also dominated by leftist Jewish labor unions opposed to the Tammany Hall Democratic political machine), and the Conservative party (formed by Goldwater Republicans in 1965 to oppose liberal Republican John Lindsay with its first candidate, celebrated columnist William F. Buckley, Jr.). Often, the endorsement and support of these small third parties has provided the margin required for victory in closely contested elections. Occasionally, fusion slates emerged to back cross-over and independent candidates (e.g., Fiorella LaGuardia in the 1930s and 1940s and John Lindsay in 1965 and 1969).

McNickle describes ethnic ticket balancing (a fine art in New York City politics), racial and ethnic tensions (e.g., most recently between blacks and Jews), the decline and fall of the Tammany Hall machine marked by the ouster of Carmine DeSapio in 1961 by the (Greenwich) Village Independent Democrats (where Ed Koch launched his political career), and the emergence of political fund-raising from business, especially the real estate industry (beginning in 1961 when incumbent Democrat Robert F. Wagner, Jr. broke with Tammany Hall).

McNickle details the controversial decade-long reign of Ed Koch, the city's second Jewish mayor. Koch switched from liberalism to neoconservatism in his underdog victory in 1977 over Mario Cuomo. McNickle explains that Koch's defeat by Dinkins in the 1989 Democratic primary was a result of Koch's increasingly stormy relations with racial minorities in the wake of racial confrontations, Jesse Jackson's impressive vote in the 1988 Democratic presidential primary, and corruption scandals in city government.

McNickle is no Jack Newfield, Murray Kempton, or Jimmy Breslin in style, but he draws interesting portraits of a fascinating cast of political characters. Whether the lessons of the changing succession of ethnic-based political coalitions in what is perhaps the nation's most liberal city can be applied to other cities is debatable, but New York City's problems are certainly similar to other cities, albeit magnified by its size.

McNickle's main contribution is that he increases the reader's understanding of how shifts in the ethnic and racial composition in New York have affected politics. A dramatic example of this effect was the recent referendum on whether Staten Island should be allowed to secede from New York City which was endorsed by voters in November 1993. Staten Island, the smallest of the city's five boroughs, has an overwhelming white-majority population (80% of its population in 1990), in contrast to the other four boroughs, none of which any longer has a majority-white population, and represents the most conservative vote in the city, mostly from white-ethnic, working-class voters.

Also writing about New York City, political scientist John Mollenkopf provides a detailed analysis of the rise of Ed Koch as a neoconservative, his defeat by black liberal David Dinkins, and the implications of his defeat for American politics. Mollenkopf is interested in the phenomenon of a conservative regime emerging in a liberal city undergoing a dramatic economic transformation. In 1991, he coedited an anthology (Mollenkopf and Castells 1991) in which scholars analyzed the restructuring of New York City. The growing gulf between the wealthy and the poor was characterized by public-sector cutbacks, stemming from New York City's fiscal problems, and increasing poverty and alienation, especially among racial minorities, including the new immigrants.

Mollenkopf seeks to synthesize pluralist and structural critiques of political power. He analyzes class and racial conflicts and concludes that race and a complex of ethnicity and religion, not class, define the city's electoral constituencies. Carefully analyzing electoral data, Mollenkopf concludes that five factors were crucial to the rise of Koch's conservative political coalition: (1) the split between white liberals, especially Jews, and black leadership; (2) incorporation of white liberal reformers into the political establishment; (3) the renewed influence of the city's regular Democratic organizations in alliance with Koch in the 1980s; (4) fragmentation of competitive black and Hispanic political leadership; and (5) Koch's success in preventing public unions (weakened after the 1975 near default) and community organizations from providing bases for electoral challenges.

Mollenkopf analyzes the 1989 Dinkins-Giuliani campaign. Noting the narrowness of Dinkins' victory and that Dinkins' governance would be hampered by fiscal restraints, Mollenkopf could not envision a new type of liberal regime yet emerging. He criticizes the Dinkins administration's failure to involve community organizations at the same level as public-sector unions in its deliberations.

In 1987, San Francisco elected a liberal mayor, former social worker and legislator Art Agnos. In *Left Coast City*, political scientist Richard DeLeon labeled Agnos's administration as an *urban antiregime*: a city government willing to challenge private capital, especially on development issues that threaten neighborhoods and popular interests (e.g., environmental). Agnos campaigned as a progressive aligned with a growth-control movement that campaigned from 1971 through 1986, primarily through the initiative process, against development interests aligned with liberal Democratic mayors Joseph Alioto and Dianne Feinstein (successor to the assassinated George Moscone), who had been supported by progressives. A growth-control plan finally passed by initiative in 1986 but only by the barest of margins. DeLeon recounts these electoral conflicts, updating Hartman's (1984) prior work.

DeLeon relies upon analysis of electoral votes (both on initiatives and for municipal office) to interpret the fortunes of pro- and controlled-growth groups. He also uses case studies of such development controversies as a proposed new baseball stadium, a massive new town project, and the waterfront to illustrate development-related politics in San Francisco.

If the 1991 election had turned out differently, DeLeon's analysis would provide the guidepost to the likely future of an urban antiregime. However, in December 1991, San Francisco voters rejected Agnos and instead elected former police chief and moderate Democrat Frank Jordan by the narrow margin of 51.7%-48.3% in a runoff election. Agnos was hampered by the city's fiscal crisis and by his conflicts with his progressive constituencies, who felt neglected by his administration. This provides insight into the differences between liberals and progressives.

In *Community Versus Commodity*, a comparative study of Santa Monica, California, and Houston, Texas, sociologists Capek and Gilderbloom analyze the emergence of a progressive regime in Santa Monica (a Los Angeles suburb), beginning in 1979. They argue that it was the tenants' movement, espousing rent control and development controls adopted by initiative in 1979, that paved the way for a progressive, controlled-growth coalition to gain electoral control of this suburban city government and for an elected rent-control board in the 1980s. Although New York and San Francisco also have rent and development controls, the electoral influence of tenant groups has not been as great. The electoral fortunes of Santa Monica's progressive regime have since oscillated, and tenant influence over rent-control policy has been weakened. Nevertheless, Santa Monica remains one of the very few examples of sustained success by progressives in urban city governance and is a model favored by the authors.

Capek and Gilderbloom contrast this with Houston, the "free enterprise capital" of the United States. Houston's conservative, progrowth regimes have been the antithesis of the liberal politics of New York City mayors like Lindsay and Dinkins, San Francisco mayors like Moscone and Agnos, and Santa Monica's progressive regime. Capek and Gilderbloom attribute this to the absence of the necessary conditions for political mobilization by potential progressive constituencies. Rosdil (1991) came to a similar conclusion in a comparative study of progressive versus progrowth cities.

These four books illustrate the difficulty that progressives experience in winning or sustaining power in municipal government. They must contend with the dominant ideology of progrowth politics, fueled by the financial largesse provided by real estate, banking, and business interests to those candidates receptive to this view. Progressives must resolve their own differences with liberals, who are often less receptive to regulation of private

property and stricter development controls. As New York City vividly illustrates, ethnic and racial tensions are often divisive factors in forging electoral coalition.

However, as the electoral victories of the antigrowth movements in San Francisco and Santa Monica demonstrate, the excesses of overdevelopment can pave the way for progressive politics. Although Dinkins was defeated in the 1993 election, his victories over Koch and Giuliani in 1989, even though by narrow margins, show the promise of liberal victories in a previous progrowth climate through a multiracial coalition. Ray Flynn in Boston and Harold Washington in Chicago achieved similar victories. The implementation of progressive reforms can be prevented by the continuing fiscal crisis that beset cities and the kind of racial strife that has been so explosive in New York City and other cities like Boston and Los Angeles. These tensions have paved the way for conservatives and neoconservatives to defeat liberals and progressives by appealing to law-and-order sentiments, as illustrated by Jordan's 1991 victory in San Francisco and Riordan's 1993 victory in Los Angeles. David Dinkins' controversial response to the black-Jewish riot in Crown Heights (Brooklyn) in 1991 may have been a pivotal factor in his defeat by Republican-Liberal candidate and former prosecutor Rudolph Giuliani in 1993.

These case studies suggest that whatever the prospects for a revival of liberal politics at the national level, the possibility of liberal and progressive politics predominating in cities in which minority populations are the increasing majority in the 1990s remains unproven yet in practice.

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