Don’t Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party

Review Number: 1856
Publish date: Thursday, 19 November, 2015
Author: Lily Geismer
ISBN: 9781400852420
Date of Publication: 2014
Price: £24.95
Pages: 392pp.
Publisher: Princeton University Press
Publisher url: http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10371.html
Place of Publication: Princeton, NJ
Reviewer: Patrick Andelic

The pejorative ‘Massachusetts liberal’ has been a staple of American political discourse for decades. Then-senator John Kerry, noted wind-surfer and Francophone, was dogged by the tag throughout his 2004 presidential campaign. Even Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney was held guilty by association in 2012 as a former governor of the Bay State (Romney was excoriated by rival Newt Gingrich as ‘a Massachusetts moderate’). More than a straightforward regional identifier, the phrase is meant to conjure up, in the words of one Club for Growth ad, the ‘tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving’ wing of the Democratic Party. It has become useful shorthand for a particular brand of elitist cultural liberalism that has apparently come to dominate the Democratic Party since the 1960s, alienating the party’s traditional supporters, many of them white, male, and working class.

Massachusetts’ claim to be the most liberal in the nation is certainly well earned. It was the first to legalise same-sex marriage, is derided as ‘Taxachusetts’ by conservatives because of its history of high income and sales tax rates, and has been represented in the Senate by progressive tribunes like Ted Kennedy and, latterly, scourge-of-the-banks Elizabeth Warren. It was the only state to popularly elect an African-American senator prior to the 1990s. Yet, as Lily Geismer argues in her impressive new book, to embrace or deride Massachusetts as a plucky liberal redoubt in a conservative America is to oversimplify its politics. Indeed, it is to be hoodwinked by ‘the most updated version of long mythology of Massachusetts exceptionalism’ (p. 15). Massachusetts is the home state of Ted Kennedy and Elizabeth Warren but also of Louise Day Hicks, the anti-busing congresswoman who became infamous for stoking racial tensions and drew comparisons to Alabama’s brutal segregationist sheriff, ‘Bull’ Connor. Though it was the first to pass a state Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), this was swiftly followed by the most restrictive abortion law in the country. The citizens of ‘Taxachusetts’ resoundingly endorsed Proposition 2½, a property tax cap which put the state alongside California at the forefront of the taxpayers’ revolt in the 1970s. It voted for Reagan. Twice.

Geismer places at the centre of these politically contradictory developments the residents of the suburbs bounded by the Route 128 highway encircling Boston. Suburbanites have been, in much of the historiography, the backbone of the conservative ascendancy in the 1960s and 1970s. Lisa McGirr’s seminal
study of suburban activists in Orange County, California is perhaps the preeminent example. Geismer’s work, which would comfortably withstand comparison to McGirr’s groundbreaking study, demonstrates that these suburbs around Boston proved fertile ground for the growth of liberal politics. Route 128 (‘America’s Technology Highway’) had been built in the 1950s and linked the suburbs of Lexington, Concord, Lincoln, Brookline, and Newton. The affluent, well-educated knowledge professionals who lived in these suburbs were the beneficiaries of federal support that would shape their political identities: first, when the high tech and defence industries in which they worked were swollen by Cold War spending; second, when development policies nurtured suburban development and locked in patterns of racial and economic segregation.

Route 128 residents prided themselves on their distinctiveness from the usual brand of conservative, conformist suburbanite. ‘Our community of new PhDs definitely were not the country-club set,’ boasted one (p. 32). Geismer shows that this sense of distinctiveness depended to a large extent on a deliberate land use agenda – zoning codes, state tax policies, local historic preservation ordinances – that created charming suburban communities at the expense of others. For the most part, the residents ignored this protective framework and attributed their privileges to merit. Highly educated, and with strong links to MIT and Harvard, education became a ‘core component’ of the suburbanites’ ‘culture and exclusivity’ (p. 34). Their social world centred on schools and PTA meetings, as well religious institutions, sporting clubs, benevolent societies, and civic organisations. As in the case of McGirr’s ‘Suburban Warriors’, these groups would form the building blocks of later campaigns.

Geismer’s book has two primary concerns: the first is to anatomise and critique the activism undertaken by liberal suburbanites in Massachusetts; the second is to demonstrate how those campaigns brought their members into the coalitions of Democratic politicians, and the impact they had on the party once inside. The earliest form of activism that would come out of the Route 128 suburbs was for fair housing. This, writes Geismer, reveals ‘the extent to which notions of homeownership converged with racial liberal principles to structure the political ideas and worldview of liberal suburbanites in the postwar era’ (p. 44). Their campaigning, through the umbrella organisation the Massachusetts Federation of Fair Housing Committees, meant that by 1963 the state had the nation’s most extensive fair housing laws. However, the agendas and policies of the fair housing movement were defined and limited by ‘the ideals of equal opportunity and the meritocratic individualism’ of suburban activists. The result was to help a handful of largely middle-class African-American families. They thus reinforced liberal ideals while left structural discrimination fundamentally unchallenged.

Geismer goes on to show how later campaigns were shaped by the meritocratic and individualist ideology of the suburban activists that sustained them. For instance, fair housing activism led to school integration campaigns, with the rechristened Massachusetts Federation for Fair Housing and Equal Rights organising boycotts of Boston’s segregated public school networks. These demonstrations led to the passage of the Racial Imbalance Act in 1965 and, a year later, the establishment of the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO), a voluntary integration programme that transferred black students from Boston to schools in the white, affluent suburbs. Though many Route 128 parents took pride in ‘preparing [their] children for a multiracial world’ (p. 71), they opposed busing their own children into Boston’s schools and the creation of more ambitious, and expensive, programmes to tackle systemic segregation. A small, and always voluntary, initiative, METCO revealed that the racial liberalism of the suburbanites was based on ‘individualist and therapeutic ideals’ in alliance with ‘the issues of low taxes, high property values, and quality education’ (p. 84). Their remedies for racial injustice remained essentially tokenistic.

A similar pattern emerged when the residents turned to environmental issues. The signal achievement here was the successful campaign to prevent the expansion of the Route 2 highway, which ultimately recruited Governor Francis Sargent as an ally. In joining the anti-highway efforts, the suburban liberals oriented the campaign’s objections away from housing displacement and towards environmental concerns, particularly concerns with protecting the ‘open spaces’ that made their suburban communities unique and special. The anti-highway expansion campaign came to revolve around the protection of Fowl Meadow, a four-hundred-
The economic convulsions of the 1970s sharpened many of those tensions. Efforts to expand METCO in the mid-1970s became entangled in the Boston busing crisis and the budgetary restrictions faced by the Massachusetts state government, and were eventually overwhelmed by the taxpayer revolt that led to the passage of Proposition 2½. Burgeoning strains of feminist activism would likewise contend with recession and racial backlash as they pushed for a state-level ERA. Massachusetts feminists embraced ‘the language and commitment to choice and opportunity’ of other suburban activists, leaving a predominantly middle-class movement increasingly distant from potential allies across racial, spatial, and class barriers. The suburban liberals thus enjoyed their greatest successes in ‘campaigns that proposed individualist solutions to rights-related issues, requiring limited financial sacrifice, and offered tangible quality-of-life benefits’ (p. 6).

In these respects, Geismer’s suburban activists hew uncomfortably close to the ‘Massachusetts liberal’ stereotype: prepared to champion only those reforms that did not threaten the value of their homes or the quality of their children’s education.

An exception perhaps was the anti-Vietnam War movement, where the political commitments of the Route 128 suburbanites put them at odds with the interests of their own industry, and thus with their own economic security. The Vietnam Moratorium movement, the biggest civil demonstration in American history, was the brainchild of a suburban father, activist and envelope-manufacturing executive from Newton, Jerome Grossman. Campaigning on peace issues in the state predated Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the American commitment in Vietnam, with Massachusetts Political Action for Peace (PAX) drawing support across the Route 128 suburbs since the early 1960s. The involvement of the suburban liberals in peace politics, writes Geismer, challenges the view that those communities with high concentrations of defence industry workers were reflexively supportive of the national security state. Peace activism would also find the suburban liberals channelling their energies into electoral politics – through the failed Senate bid of Harvard professor H. Stuart Hughes in 1962 and the more successful House campaign of priest Robert Drinan in 1970 – which brought them within the ambit of the Democratic Party.

It is on this second subject that Geismer’s makes her most original and important contribution to the historiography. In exploring the impact of the Route 128 residents on the Democratic Party, and indeed on the direction of liberalism itself, Don’t Blame Us forcefully rebuts any charge that it is little more than a diverting local study. By focusing on the experiences of these affluent knowledge professionals in the Boston suburbs, Geismer upends many of the enduring myths about the post-1968 Democratic Party.

Put simply, the conventional wisdom of the historiography is that the latter third of the 20th century saw the rise of a conservative Republican governing majority as the Democrats retreated into self-indulgent and unpopular elitist pastimes. The image of Massachusetts as a hopelessly liberal and out-of-touch enclave fits neatly within this orthodoxy. It voted for George ‘acid, amnesty, and abortion’ McGovern in 1972 and offered up the wonkish and passionless Michael Dukakis, who apparently wanted to release dangerous criminals en masse, in 1988. Both went down in lopsided defeats to uncharismatic Republican opponents. Only with the emergence of the Southern-dominated Democratic Leadership Council and the presidential candidacy of ‘New Democrat’ Bill Clinton was the party reclaimed by the sensible centrists. Geismer offers a counter-narrative, arguing that Democratic politics in the 1970s and 1980s were not a cul-de-sac, as historians like Kenneth Baer and Jeff Bloodworth would have it, but rather a thoroughfare to the agenda of the modern party. Geismer traces a clear line of descent from George McGovern through Michael Dukakis to Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.
Grassroots activism would draw the suburbanites, through the Hughes and Drinan campaigns, into the Democratic fold. They would have a profound impact on the Democratic Party, writes Geismer, their ambitions and their limitations reflected in a new set of priorities for a party once rooted in urban machines and trade unions. Geismer offers a persuasive revisionist take on the McGovern campaign arguing that it was not ‘a sixties campaign in the seventies’, as Hunter S. Thompson suggested, but rather a precursor of the party’s turn towards knowledge workers and embrace of ‘economic policies that touted the government’s stimulation of private sector high-tech industries’ (p. 150). Responding to difficulties in the Route 128 industries, precipitated by the diminishing US commitment in Vietnam, McGovern promised a policy of reconversion and new ‘peacetime jobs’ for white-collar professionals in the science and engineering sector. That McGovern carried only the Bay State only reaffirmed the residents’ exceptionalism, particularly as Watergate seemed to indicate that the other 49 states had made a catastrophic error of judgement. ‘Don’t Blame Me – I’m From Massachusetts’ ran the infamous bumper sticker that gives this study its title. McGovern’s boast after the Massachusetts primary to be forming ‘a new center’ within the party looks less like a hubristic delusion given the outsize role these suburban voters would play in the post-New Deal Democratic coalition.

Two years after McGovern’s crushing defeat, the Democrats would score their largest congressional majorities since the heyday of Lyndon Johnson, with the share of the electorate identifying as Republican slumping to 18 percent. As remarkable as the size was the nature of the incoming cohort. The class of ’74 represented a generational shift in the Congress. Nicknamed the ‘Watergate Babies,’ these legislators were generally younger, relatively inexperienced, and often reliant on suburban supporters, to whom they had appealed with fiscally conservative and anti-corruption messages. Media-savvy, ambitious, and impatient, the Watergate Babies took advantage of recent congressional reforms to pursue an increasingly entrepreneurial style of politics through committee and subcommittees. The Watergate Babies are mentioned only briefly in Geismer’s account, but future scholars would be well-advised to apply her model to studies of liberally-inclined suburbs across the country and to the congressional representatives that they returned after 1972.

Geismer’s narrative reaches its climax with the career of Michael Dukakis, and the remarkable turnaround in the state’s economic performance that he presided over. Dukakis was elected Massachusetts governor alongside the Watergate Babies in 1974 and he was in many respects an archetypal member of their class. With his fiscal conservatism and social liberalism, his pro-growth and pro-business instincts, his environmentalism, and his emphasis on rationality and forward-thinking, Dukakis personified the ideology of the Route 128 suburbanites. The credit he took for the ‘Massachusetts Miracle’ – the economic recovery that saw the Bay State boasting the lowest unemployment rate and highest per capita income in the nation by 1985 – was in a large part responsible for his winning the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988. His defeat at the hands of George H. W. Bush, argues Geismer, led to his being unfairly dismissed as a representative of the party’s bad old days. In fact, the policies that Dukakis made central to his pitch, and in particular his support for market-based incentives to stimulate the high-tech sector, would be mirrored in Bill Clinton’s platform in 1992 (and, as Geismer notes, Clinton made his debut on a national stage introducing Dukakis at the 1988 convention).
The overarching theme of Geismer’s work is ‘the reorientation of modern liberalism and the Democratic Party away from their roots in the labor union halls of northern cities, and toward white-collar suburbanites in the postindustrial metropolitan periphery’ (p. 1). Her thesis is more convincing than those which see the 1970s and 1980s as the Democratic Party’s squandered ‘wilderness years.’ Highly-educated white collar suburbanites in high-tech jobs have been crucial to the Democratic Party since the 1970s and their priorities and prejudices have been reflected in the party’s agenda. Brought into the party by McGovern and Dukakis, these voters have been at the heart of what some commentators have dubbed ‘the emerging Democratic majority.’ The predictions of a decisive political realignment in favour of liberalism that greeted Obama’s 2008 election may have been overheated, but the president’s two victories have demonstrated that these suburbanites have become a key bloc in any stable electoral majority for the Democrats.

The accomplishments of Geismer’s suburban liberals, both in shaping their communities and reorienting the Democratic Party around their sensibilities, is a challenge to teleological narratives of liberal declension after 1968. Acknowledging this not only gives historians a more nuanced appreciation of recent American political history, but will also help scholars of conservatism better understand the limits and reversals faced by the ‘Republican revolution’ in a nation where liberalism remained a vibrant force. Timely, original and richly detailed, Don’t Blame Us should be required reading for all those seeking to understand the modern Democratic Party and trajectory of liberalism in the late 20th century.

Notes


Other reviews:
Boston Globe

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1856

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/136855