

The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution. By David Paul Kuhn. (New York: Oxford Press, 2020.) Pp. 416. Hardcover, \$20.17.

Hundreds of construction workers and anti-Vietnam War protesters engaged in a series of bloody confrontations in the streets of downtown New York City on May 8, 1970. Taking place in the shadow of the still-unfinished World Trade Center days after the Kent State massacre, the event illustrated the growing tension between two wings of the Democratic Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s, not only over the Vietnam War but also social and cultural issues.

In *The Hardhat Riot*, David Paul Kuhn, a political reporter who has written extensively on recent presidential politics in the United States, explores this nearly forgotten episode in New York City history, arguing that an examination of the fracas explains the movement of a large number of white working-class voters away from the Democratic Party. Kuhn's thesis is that the May 8, 1970, event and national and local political reaction to it shed light on the origins of the breakdown of the Democratic Party's New Deal coalition. Kuhn argues that cultural and class differences between working-class whites and upper-class liberals largely explain the political realignment that started in the 1960s and continues to the present day. The actions of the construction workers, the anti-war protesters, and the spectators from the police and Wall Street workers during the days of mayhem, according to Kuhn, illustrate in microcosm the class conflict that played a critical role in destroying the uneasy alliance between upper-class liberals and working-class whites that previously formed the foundation of the Democratic Party's New Deal alliance.

The Hardhat Riot explores the intersection between national and local New York City politics using a case study method. The white working-class, many of whom were first and second-generation Americans seeking to achieve the proverbial "American dream" of middle-class respectability, took great offense at criticism of the United States and its foreign policy by anti-war protesters, many of whom were from the upper classes, viewing such criticism as a personal affront to their values and goals. Thus, for Kuhn, class and cultural differences between whites led to the breakdown of the New Deal coalition and played a role in explaining the white working-class flight to the Republican Party that began in the 1960s.

Focusing predominately on the events of May 8, 1970 and their aftermath, Kuhn draws upon local and national news coverage, as well as a mountain of police reports. In doing so, Kuhn offers a blow-by-blow chronicle of the bloody events that engulfed downtown Manhattan, sending more than a hundred people to hospitals and threatening to spill over into City Hall itself.

Kuhn, a gifted storyteller, not only masterfully reconstructs the unrest but also describes how the event was the product of intra-city politics. Mayor John Lindsay's decision to lower the United States flags in the city to half-mast to mourn the deaths of Kent State students on May 4, 1970, sparked the unrest. This seemingly innocuous decision, described by Kuhn as out-of-touch with many New Yorkers' feelings, set into motion a series of violent events that rocked downtown Manhattan by igniting long-standing tension between segments of New York City's electorate. In Kuhn's view, Mayor Lindsay, a wealthy liberal whose political coalition included affluent liberals, the anti-Vietnam War crowd, as well as African American and Puerto Rican voters, had national political aspirations but alienated and angered many working-class whites with his opposition to the Vietnam War.

The presence of a large number of anti-war protesters sparked the violence on May 8, 1970, according to Kuhn. Hundreds of construction workers, many of whom were on break from their work at the World Trade Center construction, attacked the protesters after the anti-war protesters engaged in a series of provocative actions, including mocking the construction workers and disrespecting the United States flag. The presence of large numbers of protesters set off hours of uncontrollable violence as construction workers attacked not only anti-war protesters but also institutions perceived as “elitist.” For example, construction workers stormed Pace University, beating up numerous students and professors, and then threatened to break into City Hall to raise the United States flag. Despite more than one hundred hospitalizations, Kuhn describes how the police, who shared the same ethnic and class background as the construction workers, largely, looked on as observers to the violence and mayhem. The hours of violence only subsided when the construction workers grew tired and ended their rampage.

While Kuhn argues that the events in May 1970 were the product of intra-city politics, Kuhn also places the unrest in a larger national context, providing insight into President Nixon’s political strategy. Kuhn details how Nixon benefited from larger political trends, including the movement of large numbers of Northern white working-class voters from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. At the same time, Kuhn details how Nixon and his staff viewed the events taking place in New York City with cautious alarm, fearing that the nation was on the verge of a civil war. The administration feared that the events could spark widespread unrest between working-class whites and the anti-war left that included radical and violent elements like the Black Panther Party and the Weather Underground. Thus, according to Kuhn, the Nixon administration sought a quick end to the violence, fearing it might spread across the nation. This portrayal of Nixon as both bystander and beneficiary of the seismic political changes of the 1960s and 1970s also adds to the historical debate over Nixon’s so-called Southern strategy and presidency.

As discussed above, Kuhn focuses largely on class and culture for the tension between the white working-class and upper-class white liberals. The Vietnam War and a collection of cultural issues identified by Kuhn undoubtedly were issues that divided whites in New York City. However, Kuhn’s tendency to downplay the racial elements of the breakdown of the New Deal coalition is the book’s weakness. In the zero-sum view of the time, many working-class whites viewed the Democratic Party as advancing the interests of African Americans and other minorities at their expense. For example, in New York City, the migration of large numbers of African Americans from the Southern states and immigration from the Caribbean from the 1940s to the 1970s changed New York City’s demographics. In the period from 1940 to 1970, the percentage of Black residents in New York City increased from nine percent to over twenty percent of the population.¹ This demographic change played a role in the transformation of nearly a dozen neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Bronx, and Queens, previously home to many working-class ethnic whites, into predominately African American neighborhoods. While various factors explain these demographic changes, including deindustrialization, federal policies that favored suburbanization, and policies that trapped African Americans in New York City in certain outer-borough neighborhoods, many working-class ethnic whites directed their anger at African Americans and liberals like Mayor Lindsay. White-working-class people in New York City often felt that the liberal leaders in the Democratic Party changed their priorities

¹ Nancy Foner, “How exceptional is New York? Migration and multiculturalism in the empire city,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (November 2007): 1006

in their attempt to curry favor with a growing minority population while ignoring white working-class residents' interests. Thus, while racism may not have been the only driving force that resulted in the realignment of many working-class whites from the Democratic to the Republican Party, racial polarization played a larger role in the political realignment than that described by Kuhn.

Despite Kuhn's downplaying of issues of race in the movement of working-class whites from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, *The Hardhat Riot: Nixon, New York City, and the Dawn of the White Working-Class Revolution* is a masterfully written book for anyone who wants a more in-depth insight into the political history of New York City and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Kuhn adds to the discussion of the origins of the political realignment of the white-working-class in the United States that continues to shape the politics of the United States. Furthermore, the book is also a must-read for anyone interested in New York City politics. It describes the relationship between domestic and national politics that shaped and continues to influence New York City's complex political landscape. Finally, it contributes to the scholarship into the origins of the schism between Manhattan liberals and the other boroughs traditionally populated by the working-class, a central aspect of New York City's political landscape for the better part of the twentieth century.

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