‘Black Silent Majority’ focuses on Black activism, development of narcotics policy in New York

October 22, 2015 | Filed under METRO | Posted by editor

REVIEW

“Black Silent Majority: The Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Politics of Punishment” by Michael Javen Fortner. Published by Harvard University Press, 325 pages, $29.95

BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

In 1967, the Rev. Oberia Dempsey, the youth minister at the Abyssinian Baptist Church (who had also held the ceremonial position of “Mayor of Harlem”), declared that criminal behavior related to drugs had gotten out of hand.

“Take the junkies off the streets and put ‘em into camps,” Dempsey recommended. “Sure the Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP would howl about violation of constitutional rights. But we’ve got to end this terror and restore New York to decent people. Instead of fighting all the time for civil rights we should be fighting civil wrongs.”

Six years later, the New York State legislature passed and Gov. Nelson Rockefeller signed a law mandating long prison sentences for anyone possessing or selling narcotics.

Outcry by Blacks

In “Black Silent Majority,” Michael Fortner, a professor of urban studies at the City University of New York, makes the provocative argument that this dramatic change in policy, which was adopted in many other states and resulted in the incarceration of millions of African-Americans, emanated less from a White backlash than from a mobilization of working and middle-class Blacks “against the reign of criminal terror in Harlem.”

Racialized housing policies, residential segregation and urban de-industrialization insulated White ethnics and suburbanites from the “the black urban sub-proletariat,” Fortner points out; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Whites worried more about student protests and taxes than violent crime.

By contrast, Blacks constituted about 20 percent of New York’s population in 1972, but suffered 60 percent of drug-related deaths. And so, according to Fortner, “black leaders pleaded with white legislators to extend the penal arm of the state into their ‘dark ghetto.’”

Not fully explained

Fortner’s thesis is not entirely persuasive. He suggests, for example, that calls for education, jobs, social services, and rehabilitation are inconsistent with support for punishment while also acknowledging that many Americans, Black and White, advocated (and still advocate) both structural reforms and making individuals more accountable for their actions.

Nor does Fortner adequately explain why White politicians would enact the policy preferences of “the black silent majority” while virtually every Black member of the New York State Assembly and Senate voted against the Rockefeller drug laws.

That said, by emphasizing the importance of socio-economic class in an admittedly racialized political culture, Fortner has made an important contribution to our understanding of public policy.

Motivating factor

It appears that in the late ’60s and early ’70s middle-class Whites and White ethnics were motivated by a desire to protect their children from drugs (and the broader culture) rather than by an urgent desire to guard their communities against Black and Puerto Rican drug addicts.

And middle-class Blacks do appear to have responded to dramatic increases in black-on-black crime by dismissing “bleeding heart liberals” – and opting to protect the benefits of their newly won economic gains through aggressive policing and punishment.
Proposed solutions
A survey of Harlem business owners in 1971, Fortner indicates, revealed four proposed solutions to the community’s crime problems: stricter law enforcement and an improved court system (21 percent); more policemen (16 percent); taking junkies off the street (9 percent); and more severe punishment for criminals (6 percent).

Put “in the unenviable position of furnishing a history that shows that working and middle-class African-Americans are partially responsible for the mass incarceration of Black sons, brothers, husbands and fathers,” Fortner concludes by giving voice to his own regret about the shift from liberal sentiments to conservative acts.

And by endorsing what appears to be a growing sentiment in the United States against the laws that produced the massive incarceration of people of color, at great cost to taxpayers, while failing to curb drug addiction and crime.

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