

## **Class Distinctions**

### **The Inheritance: How Three Families and America Moved From Roosevelt to Reagan**

By Samuel G. Freedman. Simon & Schuster, 1996. 464 pp.

#### ***Philip Berroll***

In a photograph at the front of this book, three fortyish political activists – Frank Trotta, Jr., Leslie Maeby, and Tim Carey – stand together at a restaurant in Peekskill, N.Y. Peekskill is the home base of conservative Republican George Pataki, who was elected New York's Governor in 1994 on promises to cut taxes and spending (i.e., social-service programs) and bring back the death penalty. Both Carey and Maeby worked for Pataki's campaign, and it's a safe bet that Trotta, a lifelong Republican, gave him his vote.

A progressive could be forgiven for being repelled by this trio of plump, smug reactionaries – I certainly was. But it is a measure of Samuel G. Freedman's achievement in *The Inheritance* that one finishes the book with a deeper understanding of the three... and a feeling of sadness at losing them to the “enemy” camp.

I say "losing" because Carey, Maeby, and Trotta all came from families – Irish, Polish, and Italian respectively – who had an allegiance to the Democrats that rivaled their love of America itself. Those families typified the working-class Catholics who formed the bedrock of the party for decades, especially after the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. But the younger generation is symbolic of the "Reagan Democrats" who helped return the G.O.P. to power almost 50 years later.

In *The Inheritance*, Freedman, a former *New York Times* reporter and author of two previous books – *Upon This Rock*, a portrait of a black church, and *Small Victories*, about a teacher in an inner-city public school – has put a human face on this phenomenon, using a skillful blend of the "macro" of national trends and statistics and the "micro" minutiae of everyday lives. I can't recommend the book strongly enough for *Tikkun* readers, for it addresses one of the most frequently discussed questions in these pages: why have millions of voters from blue-collar backgrounds abandoned the Democrats, even though it seemed clearly against their economic interests to do so? The theme of *The Inheritance* is that for these voters, it's *not* just the

economy, stupid – gut issues have competed with pocketbook issues for primacy, and in recent years have frequently won.

Freedman begins his story with one grandparent from each of his three families. All of them had truly Dickensian childhoods. Silvio Burigo was raised by relatives after his immigrant father committed suicide; he left school at an early age to become a plumber. Joseph Obrycki's father, a leader of the Polish community in Baltimore, was a business failure, and the teenaged Joe became the principal support of his family – as a numbers runner. Lizzie Sanford (later Garrett) and her widowed Irish mother fled the poverty of Liverpool and settled in New York City's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, where things were not much better.

The Depression years found all three with families of their own, struggling to get by. For Burigo and Garrett, support for the Democrats was a matter of bread-on-the-table survival: Roosevelt promised economic improvement and a social-welfare safety net. For Obrycki, now active in Baltimore's Democratic machine, it was about political loyalty. But in varying degrees, they all came to establish a deeper emotional connection to the party (class resentment was also a factor – in their eyes, "Republican" meant "rich Protestant"). And they helped spread the gospel to their relatives, friends, and co-workers.

For more than three decades, more loyal Democratic voters could not be found. But then cracks in the bedrock began to appear, not among the older generation – though Burigo was angered by the government-ordered integration of his union in the 1960's – but with their children and grandchildren, who knew not FDR. For them, liberal-Democratic politics came to be seen not as a source of aid and protection, but as an enemy. And the fault lines, as Freedman illustrates, were often created by the clash of opposing social values.

As a young military policeman, Sanford's grandson Tim Carey stood guard at the Pentagon during the massive antiwar protest of October 1967. It awakened his class consciousness, but in a radically different sense from his grandmother: he saw himself as being attacked by college kids with draft deferments while he and his buddies were "bearing the burden they shirked." (With his reporter's eye for the telling detail, Freedman depicts Carey "[seeing] the first can

fly...Tomato soup, he noted as it lay dented on the ground; he had stocked plenty in his days at Shopwell.")

Frank Trotta, grandson of Burigo, was also alienated by the antiwar movement's excesses, and resentful that tenants of the complex where his father worked as a janitor were given low-rent apartments, on which many neglected the upkeep, by the government. And both he and Carey were angered by the apparent ease with which nonwhite students were given admission and scholarships – for which they had to struggle – to New York's state university system.

Joe Obrycki's daughter Vilma, meanwhile, had left Baltimore with her husband, Jack Maeby; they eventually settled in Colonie, N.Y., a suburb of Albany, the state capital. In their case, liberalism had done its job all too well: towns like Colonie grew with plenty of help from government programs (e.g., FHA housing loans and the interstate highway system). Yet local Republicans thrived by attacking Albany's Democrats for their "bloated payroll" and other financial excesses. All across the country, suburban, formerly blue-collar voters were buying into a similar ideology. And it was passed down to their children – including the Maebys' daughter Leslie, who eventually became finance director for the state Republican party.

It is disheartening to read about Maeby, Tim Carey (a campaign strategist) and Frank Trotta (a lawyer) expending their energies on people like Pataki and Alfonse D'Amato. And Freedman suggests that this was not inevitable: he devotes a chapter to Tim's uncle, Richie Garrett, whose ecological concerns made him a Democratic activist in the late '60s. But he also depicts, convincingly, the political incompetence and arrogance that helped drive other such voters from the Democrats.

Indeed, arrogance, and elitism, is a recurring motif in the book. Freedman doesn't object to most Left/liberal ideology; but he makes it clear that if it had been presented to these people in a dialogue of equals, instead of with the attitude of *we know best, and you must be a racist/fascist/militarist if you disagree*, the wholesale defections of the '80s might have been avoided. He suggests, for example, that while Silvio Burigo was something of a racist, bigotry alone did not explain his resistance, and that of his fellow plumbers, to integrating their union. It was more a matter of ethnic solidarity – membership was one of the few things these men could pass on to

their sons and nephews – and this attitude, however narrow-minded, could have at least have been addressed by the union's opponents.

What of the future? At the end of *The Inheritance*, Freedman sounds pessimistic: "When [the older] generation passes, so will the collective memory of the New Deal." But while the South, that other one-time bastion of Democratic solidarity, may be irretrievably lost, the rest of the country, judging from the election of 1996, is still up for grabs. And if there is any hope of winning back the Reagan Democrats and avoiding the creation of new ones, the lessons of this book must be put into practice.

*Originally written for Tikkun magazine.*