http://www.salon.com/2015/11/01/the_gops_anti_modern_rage_what_republican_anger_at_the_cnbc_moderators_tells_us_about_the_party/

Sunday, Nov 1, 2015 03:58 AM MST

The GOP's anti-modern rage: What Republican anger at the CNBC moderators tells us about the party

Why the GOP furor over last week's debate? The right bristles at idea its claims should be tested against evidence

Kim Messick

In an excellent Slate piece on October 29, William Saletan examined the reaction of GOP presidential candidates and their supporters to the questions posed by the moderators of the October 28 debate. After making it clear that the questions were both substantive and appropriate, Saletan drew exactly the right conclusion about the GOP's denunciation of the moderators (and "the media" generally) as hopelessly biased: namely, that the Party's real problem wasn't with any particular question or moderator, but with the idea that its assertions and proposals should be tested against empirical evidence at all. Saletan's concern was mainly to document this truth, so he didn't spend much time asking why it should be so. I think a few minutes spent pondering this question could be helpful, as it exposes a fundamental fact about today's Republican Party. The GOP's oft-remarked "civil war," I will argue, is really a conflict over the meaning of conservatism in the modern world, a conflict ultimately driven by demographic shifts in the Party's electoral base.

From the time it emerged out of the collapse of the Whig Party in the mid-1850s until the early 1960s, the Republican Party drew most of its support from business elites and from the small towns of the Northeast and Midwest. It embraced capitalism as the economic expression of American values — freedom, self-determination, progress. Its principal difference from the more populist Democratic Party, then ascendant in large Northern cities and in the mostly rural South, was its untroubled view that these values, when properly realized, would inevitably organize society into a kind of natural hierarchy — a hierarchy based on achievement and competition and not, like the antebellum South, on a static, semi-feudal caste system.

This commitment to market society meant that the GOP had to evolve as capitalism evolved. As small producers and merchants gave way to the industrial capitalism of the Gilded Age, and as this, in turn, was augmented by the first forms of full-blown finance capitalism, the Party sought to adapt its policies to the social changes this evolution entailed. There was a clear, and clearly fruitful, dialectic between GOP "progressives" such as Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Dewey and more conservative elements usually anchored (paradoxically enough) in small towns and corporate boardrooms. The answers that emerged were always contested, but the central question was obvious

enough: How should the Party's doctrine change as the capitalism it endorsed changed the world? This dialectical engagement with history produced a Party that was ideologically flexible and openly engaged in a critical appraisal of modern life. Evidence mattered. It also mattered for responsible politicians to display a sober and prudent respect for evidence.

The GOP's own history took a decisive turn in the early 1960s. When the Democratic Party under John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson committed itself to equal rights for African-Americans, its traditional hold over the South (rooted in the Republican Lincoln's prosecution of the Civil War) loosened dramatically. The Republican Party moved quickly to exploit this opportunity. Taking their cue from Barry Goldwater, whose defense of "states' rights" in the 1964 election won him four interior states of the old Confederacy never claimed in the 20th century by a Republican Presidential candidate, GOP strategists adapted their defense of "small government" to the racially charged concerns of white Southerners. Suddenly the important thing was not to defend the liberty of African-Americans from the Jim Crow oppression of local and state governments, but to safeguard those governments from the specter of federal overreach. This "Southern Strategy" worked brilliantly. Beginning in 1968, the Republican Party elected every President save one (Jimmy Carter) until 1992. It essentially owned the White House for a generation.

The Southern Strategy wasn't an event, however; it was a process. Its continued success depended upon an implacable search for ever-more stringent versions of the GOP's new Dixie-centric doctrine. As ideology became more important to the Party than history, it did what such movements always do: it embarked on a series of ritual purges intended to secure purity and fealty. The result was a Party whose leaders exhibited a clear tendency toward greater ideological rigidity. Reagan was more conservative than Nixon, just as Gingrich was more conservative than Reagan and Tom DeLay more conservative than Gingrich. Today, Ted Cruz and Tom Cotton (and most other members of the "Freedom Caucus") are to the right of Reagan, Gingrich and DeLay.

But an insistence on purity cuts both ways. It pushed GOP officials into a dialectic with their voters, one that replaced the the Party's earlier engagement with modern history. As Republican doctrine became increasingly right-wing, so did its support among the electorate. Liberals and moderates largely fled, becoming Independents or Democrats. Each turn of this screw produced a Party more dependent than ever on its most radical elements, which of course simply drove it toward wilder rhetoric and harsher policies. The Southern Strategy worked, if anything, too well. The GOP's effort to capitalize on the mid-Sixties disaffection of Southern whites made it into a Party largely alienated from everyone else. In the 2012 election, the South accounted for 70 percent of Mitt Romney's electoral votes.

It also left the GOP at the mercy of the peculiar habits, cognitive and cultural, of its purified, sanitized "base." For these voters, as the events of the summer made clear — the rise of Trump and Carson, the sacking first of John Boehner and then of his hapless hand-picked successor, Kevin McCarthy — have little if any attachment to the

Republican Party as an institution. Their contempt for the GOP “establishment” could not be more obvious. (A generation back, most of them were Democrats.) What matters to them is their ideology, an ideology based on a wholesale rejection of the social changes wrought by modernity. Simply put, they despise the modern vision of a society in which distinctions based on race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, have no place. On their view, these distinctions between persons are etched into the fabric of the world itself by the world’s author, God. To ignore them, to try to build a social world without them, is both hubristic and perverse. It is, quite literally, heresy.

The GOP base no longer looks to history for instruction. It doesn’t ask itself how to adapt conservatism to the modern world; it asks how it can adapt the modern world to its version of conservatism. That world it regards as hopelessly fallen, as so much detritus to be swept away. This is the explanation for the indifference to — if not contempt for — evidence and empiricism that Saletan so clearly perceives. A “fact” about the world ceases to matter when one rejects that world and regards it as little more than a shadow, an unnatural lure contrived by secular-humanist conspirators. Why take an interest in the “evidence” gathered from such a place? What authority could it possibly have?

Doubtless there is a large measure of opportunism behind the Republican candidates’ complaints about the CNBC moderators and the “lamestream” media generally. Given the chance, what politician would not prefer less scrutiny to more? But the chance was created by the anti-modern rage of the GOP base, which is perfectly sincere and not at all opportunist. If a “fact” has no more force than the reality it describes, then a questioner has only as much authority as the facts he or she marshals. The rest of us may regard the CNBC moderators as trying — always imperfectly, but genuinely trying — to speak truthfully about a world we all share. But the Republican base rejects this as a sham. No truths can be dredged from the muck of modernity. What looks like a question is really an attempt to assert a spurious reality, conspiracy disguising itself as objectivity.

After the 2012 election, much was made of the curiously hermetic quality of today’s GOP — its retreat into a “bubble” in which the Republican faithful listen only to themselves. Who can forget the sight of Karl Rove on election night descending into the bowels of Fox News, certain that the election was not really decided in favor of Barack Obama, only to run headlong into the stubborn empiricism of Fox’s statisticians and researchers? Rove’s judgments were mistaken, Fox anchor Megyn Kelly chided, just something “you tell yourself as a Republican to make yourself feel better.” If 2015 has taught us anything, it’s that more and more Republicans are incapable of appreciating the distinction.

"Kim Messick lives in North Carolina. His blog, "Primarily Politics," is at kimmessick.wordpress.com."