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Kansas Politics in the Bigger Picture: A Review Essay of What's the Matter with Kansas?

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The morning after the 2004 election, Andrew Kohut, Director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, was interviewed on National Public Radio. His organization had conducted exit polls nationwide the day before and discovered that roughly one voter in five had listed moral concerns as their number one reason for selecting a presidential candidate. In a year when the nation has been consumed with debates over redistributing wealth, redefining the meaning of civil liberties, and dealing with a major ongoing war in Iraq, not to mention Afghanistan, twenty percent of voters chose their presidential candidate on none of these, focusing instead on moral considerations.¹

Who are the voters who ignore issues of class, war, civil liberties (and rights), and instead vote on moral politics? They are, Thomas Frank argues, like a secretary at Johnson & Gage, a well-connected law firm with offices in a suburb of Kansas City. Bill Graves, then the moderate Republican Governor of Kansas, was at a fundraiser on the tenth floor of the firm's office building when he was confronted by a woman explaining that *she* would not be voting for him at the next election. The reason: abortion. Graves was pro-choice, and his primary challenger was pro-life. The governor was not right-wing enough for the hourly wage earner, who easily had the lowest income in the room by a factor of ten. "And that is Kansas for you," explains Frank, "a state where the working-class heroes are even more Republican than their bosses" (106).

In *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank seeks to explain why so many working-class Americans like the woman above act against their economic interests and vote Republican. His method of inquiry is innovative, highly enjoyable and illuminating, and while the jury may still be out regarding how much his explanation applies to other states, the thesis is so thought provoking and clever that the book more than rewards the reader's efforts.

To lay the groundwork for the argument that unfolds, Frank takes his readers for a visit to three distinctly different Kansas communities. He starts with the wealthy suburb of Mission Hills, located between Topeka and Kansas City, and home to executives of the New Economy headquarters of firms such as the humble power company once known as Western Resources. Its chairman, David Wittig, following the ambitions of another visionary power company in Texas, decided that Western could do well for itself by acquiring companies that flew under the regulatory radar screen. As is the nature of New Economy companies, the plan was to socialize the risk while privatizing the profits, piling the corporation's debt in the public utility branch that would remain in Topeka, while the profits were to be placed offshore. As with Enron, Western fell on hard times, and Wittig was forced to walk away after an illegal bank deal fell through. But fear not for Mr. Wittig, the local papers discovered that even after leaving he was

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eligible for as much as \$42.5 million in additional compensation. His stockholders did not fair so well, of course, as the company's stock fell seventy-three percent along the way. On the other side of Mission Hills, the phone company Sprint was putting the finishing touches on a 3.9 million square foot corporate campus to hold its headquarters. As the paint dried, the company announced in 1999 that it was attempting to merge with another giant in the history of corporate responsibility, WorldCom, and by the way, would probably be moving. The residents of Kansas City were stunned. All those good jobs leaving! A local business writer comforted his readers: "Kansas City can take pride in having provided an environment in which a company could be nurtured to the point of fetching the highest acquisition price in the history of corporate mergers" (41). Small comfort, one imagines, for the taxpayers left holding the bill for the sixteen new parking garages on the Sprint campus that would be sitting idle. The merger fell through, and the company stayed put, albeit with a few less employees, and a stock price that dropped ninety percent along the way.

The second community is literally a world away from the first. Garden City, Kansas, is known in the world of business-speak as a "rural boomtown." Located in western Kansas, the meatpacking plants in Garden City, along with nearby Liberal and Dodge City, process twenty percent of all the beef consumed in America. The three towns have a slaughter capacity of twenty-four thousand head of cattle a day. Garden City's three largest employers are Tyson, ConAgra, and Cargill Meat Solutions—employers who placed their slaughter houses in towns like Garden City for one simple reason: they call the shots on salaries, local taxes, and local regulations. The town's workers drive on dilapidated roads, live mostly in trailer parks, and given that their jobs are statistically the most dangerous in America, few remain long enough to enjoy the benefits of a health care system and pension. Costs are externalized to local government and charities, creating the odd situation where the more the local corporations grow, the weaker the local communities become financially.

Finally, readers end up in Wichita, population 340,000. Home to airfields belonging to Boeing, Cessna (now Textron), Learjet (now Bombardier), and Beechcraft (now Raytheon), Wichita is to airplanes what Detroit is to automobiles—still a major producer, only quickly shedding the high paying union jobs. Between 1999 and 2002, union workers at Boeing saw their numbers decline by half, and unemployment in the city rose to seven percent.

The wealthy professional community of Mission Hills, the (increasingly ex-) union city of Wichita, and the impoverished Garden City are as demographically different as three towns in a windblown Midwestern state can be. Yet in one regard they are completely alike: "One thing unites all these different groups of Kansans, these millionaires and trailer-park dwellers, these farmers and thrift-

store managers and slaughterhouse workers and utility executives: they are almost all Republicans” (67).

Populism Kansas Style, Then and Now

The quick and dirty version of Frank’s thesis is that working-class Americans, especially the ones lowest on the socioeconomic ladder, have moved to the Republican party because the Right has effectively redefined political cleavages from economic ones to moral ones. Moreover, it has done so in a manner that has captured the hearts and minds—or more accurately, the *souls*—of working-class Americans. This in itself is nothing groundbreaking. The book’s important contribution lies in the explanation it provides for how and why this redefinition happened. In this regard, Frank has presented us with an argument that is insightful, and at first glance, powerfully convincing. The explanation centers on what Frank calls “The Great Backlash.”

Before we can understand what the Great Backlash is and how it currently functions in contemporary Kansas, we need to understand something about the Kansas of old. In reviewing the political history of Kansas over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Frank sees a state where citizens have always been receptive to populist messages. Whether this was due to an agrarian economy that largely relied on East Coast financiers, or perhaps because the lonely plains left residents feeling socially alienated from the coastal fashion setters such as Hollywood and New York, populist movements that rallied the masses against a distant and different elite have traditionally fared well in the Sunflower State. The flat square surfaces that separated one field from another, and one town from its neighbors, were all constructed by human imagination, and Kansans, Frank suggests, saw the social world as a place that could be “remade as the human mind saw fit” (32). Places named “Radical City” and “Liberal” were founded. *Appeal to Reason*, a socialist paper with subscriptions in the hundreds of thousands was based in Kansas, and in 1908 Eugene Debs accepted the Socialist Party’s nomination in the town of Girard, located in Crawford County. Four years later, Debs carried Crawford, one of just four counties he won nationwide (all of which being in the Midwest). Populism (this time with a capital “P”), swept through Kansas at the dawn of the twentieth century like a twister through a wheat field. Following Mary Elizabeth Lease’s famous exhortation to “raise less corn and more hell,” the citizens of the fair state of Kansas voted in Populist governors, Populist senators and congressmen, Populist supreme court justices and city councils.

The historian Vernon L. Parrington interpreted the success of Populism in Kansas as due to an awakening of class consciousness, a sort of political epiphany. They were enlisted in a class struggle. They used the vocabulary of realism, and the unctuous political platitudes and sophistries of country-seat politicians rolled off their minds like water from a duck’s

back. They were fighting a great battle—they believed—against Wall Street and the eastern money-power; they were bent on saving America from the plutocracy; and they swept over the county-seat towns, burying the old machine politicians under an avalanche of votes, capturing state legislatures, electing Congressmen and Senators and looking forward to greater power (Parrington, 1930: 266, cited on 79).

As Elizabeth Sanders (1999) has noted, the Populist movement succeeded where members of the lower economic classes were able to unite together in a form of class warfare. Populism at the turn of the twentieth century certainly was about class warfare, yet it had another element as well. As Frank notes, the huge gatherings with their public speeches and singing, and the plainspoken style of their arguments had all the markings of a religious crusade. As one Kansan noted, Populism was a “pentecost of politics in which a tongue of flame set upon every man, and each spake as the spirit gave him utterance” (34). It was, as Parrington noted above, as though an epiphany had opened the eyes of citizens to their position in the great socioeconomic world, and they discovered not only that their own interests were not being served, but also that they could do something about it by becoming involved in the democratic process.

A century later, populism has once again swept across the state of Kansas. Gathering in churches, farmers and workers listen to leaders who employ plain-spoken terms to help the weakest rediscover their political power and use it to make their work environments less safe by defunding OSHA, support movements to spend less on their children’s education and on social services in general, and to elect politicians whose sworn mission is to ensure corporations have the right to stop providing adequate healthcare for their workers. The common people have risen and have become a mighty force in their own demise. As Frank notes, “They are massing at the gates of Mission Hills, hoisting the black flag, and while the millionaires tremble in their mansions, they are bellowing out their terrifying demands, “We are here,” they scream, “to cut your taxes” (109).

The Great Backlash

The right-wing populist movement Frank sees sweeping through Kansas today, has, in his framework, reversed the two causal elements of the former movement a century earlier. Whereas the former was open class warfare with the effect of being a pseudo-religious movement, the latter is a religious movement with the effect of being a pseudo-class war. Only this time, the participants are not fighting to improve their economic situation, but rather to harm it. Why would they do this? The explanation Frank provides has several elements. First, class as a concept has been buried and replaced with the concept of *authenticity*. This is coupled with a strong anti-intellectual streak that argues the overeducated are a dangerous and arrogant other, powerfully imposing their will on the Common

Man. Second, through endlessly cataloguing lists of outrages they have experienced in their daily lives (what Frank calls the *plen-T-plaint*), political entrepreneurs have depicted a world gone badly awry, where powerful liberals have stolen all that was valuable about America and replaced it with regulations designed to shape the course of affairs in a dangerously foreign direction. Finally, social problems have been disconnected from the economic system. The result is the Great Backlash:

[A] style of conservatism that first came snarling onto the national stage in response to the partying and protests of the sixties. While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues—summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art—which it then marries to pro-business economic policies. Cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends (5).

The populists of a century ago divided the world into us and them. The “us” were those who shared their economic interests, or at least who acted in their interests. Friends were decided on economic criteria. For today’s populists, friend or foe is decided along decidedly different terms. For today’s right, Frank argues, “culture outweighs economics as a matter of public concern” (6). What matters most, for members of the Backlash, is that someone be like them—like not in the manner of the Anti-Federalists, who wanted representatives who shared the same financial interests as the people—but rather the same likes and tastes. In short, someone who is as authentically average as they are. John Kerry, son of wealth, educated at an elite prep school and then Yale, is most clearly one of “them.” He windsurfs on Nantucket, he orates, and his wife has a disturbingly European accent. He did not want to have Velveeta served on his cheese steak during a visit to Philadelphia, and you just know that behind the blinds of his home on Beacon Hill, he listens to classical music and sips white wine. So what if he has consistently voted for programs aimed at protecting the working family, has been a friend of the environment, and has favored programs targeted towards the nation’s worst off? He isn’t really *one of us*. This is in contrast to George W. Bush, son of wealth, educated at an elite prep school and then Yale. He vacations on a ranch, his wife is undistinguished, and he cannot even get a sentence out straight. If he were not a recovered alcoholic, he would certainly drink Budweiser.

Samuel Popkin (1994) has noted that citizens who do not care to spend great amounts of time studying candidates often employ informational shortcuts to make their voting decision. Such “cognitive misers” look to other characteristics of candidates, among which are a candidate’s personality. If a candidate for office acts the way a voter does, it is considered likely that he or she shares a similar world outlook. This is something like the Anti-Federalists Melancton Smith and Federal Farmer envisioned, but different in an important way. The Anti-

Federalists thought that at the end of the day, what mattered most in politics were economic issues, and they wanted leaders who shared the same financial interests as those they represented. Supporters of the Backlash select leaders on the basis of social issues, and when leaders cut their own taxes dramatically and those of the working-class only a little, well, at least they are anti-abortion!

Coupled with a concern for authenticity is a strong anti-intellectual element. The danger of the liberals, sipping their lattes on the coastal Blue States, is not merely that they hold all the power (even during Republican control of both chambers of Congress and the White House), but that they think they know better than the average man what is good for them. Gone are the days when Alexis de Tocqueville witnessed “equality,” in which each knew what was best for his or her own interests. Today’s liberals, educated at the elite schools of New England, think they know what is best for everyone. As proof, we need look no farther than *Roe v. Wade* (1973). What lies at the heart of this case is the expertise of doctors. Doctors? How can abortion be about what doctors think? This is a moral issue, plain and simple. At least, Frank argues, that is how the Common Man sees it. When you are sick, you go to someone who has studied medicine. When you need legal advice, you go to someone who has studied law. But when it comes to politics, the only school worth a penny is the school of hard knocks, a place few of the latte liberals have attended.

As a result, science has little value for members of the Backlash. Science can tell clever lies about evolution, for example. It can be used as a weapon against those who want to use their property as they wish. John Kerry and his complicated answers get nowhere with members of the Backlash. Divide the world into good and evil and then get down to business! Much as with the intervening carpetbaggers of the Reconstruction Era, today’s experts may claim to have the working people’s interests in mind, but people so different, so *inauthentic*, are simply too foreign to be trusted. What else explains why presidential candidates feel such a strong need to be videotaped duck hunting?

Perhaps having liberals in power would not be so bad if only they led the country in the right direction, but as right-wing media figures such as David Brooks so effectively point out, basically everything they do is wrong. The second element of the Great Backlash, Frank notes, is that media on the right catalogue so effectively how the world is going to hell in a hand basket, and it is all to be blamed on those at the helm of the ship. He calls this the *plen-T-complaint*, short for there being plenty to complain about. Thus, day after day, on shows from *The 700 Club* to Fox News, viewers see outrages from gay pride parades to the latest social engineering experiment gone awry.²

² The most damning of them all is NBC News’ “Fleecing of America” series, which shows how big government wastes the hard-earned tax dollars of the average American. While even Hillary

The plent-T-plaint keeps outrage salient in the minds of those who support the Great Backlash. Outrage is not about a single event, it is about *everything*. One day we learn schools want to teach evolution, the next day we learn about one more way we cannot exploit our own property, the following day is yet another actress having a child out of wedlock, and then the National Endowment for the Arts is funding some anti-Christian artist... As Ann Coulter (2003) notes in *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*, “Liberals have been wrong on every major domestic and foreign policy issue from the Cold War to present.”

By now you are seeing the connection between authenticity on the one hand and the plent-T-plaint on the other. Distant liberals, so different from us, control the world, and they have stolen all that gave day-to-day life the moral authority it once held. Judeo-Christian values have been replaced by laws than run against those values. Gays getting married, evolution being taught in the schools, kids no longer allowed to pray, logging companies laying off workers because they cannot cut their own old growth timber, sex and violence on television, and abortions, abortions, abortions.

All of these problems are blamed on a distant liberal elite, while the solutions are offered by conservatives (who, it should be noted, are also elites). They get elected because they promise to correct them and come across as being so completely authentic, just one of us. People such as Rep. Todd Tiahrt of Wichita, who scolded the nation from the floor of Congress three different times in 1998 for “losing its soul” and turning its back on God and family values, or Sen. Sam Brownback, possibly the only U.S. Senator ever to wash the feet of one of his departing staff assistants, much as Jesus had done (70). Men and women like Tiahrt and Brownback go to Washington full of fire, God’s warriors, and deliver...nothing.

It is now a decade after the “Republican Revolution” and abortion is still legal, there is more violence on television than ever, kids still cannot pray in schools, vouchers have flopped, and gays still go to Disney. But look what God’s warriors in Congress have done along the way: they cut inheritance taxes on the thinnest slice of nation’s wealthiest, the number of Americans without health care has steadily grown, as have the number of citizens in prison (even as violent and property crimes have dropped), wages of the lowest-earners have not kept up with inflation, and schools from coast to coast have watched their budgets stretched more and more thinly. The electoral upshot of this failure to deliver on any of their moral promises while making getting by on a working-class wage increasingly difficult? Re-election and ever extending Republican majorities.

Rodham Clinton would not accuse NBC of being part of the great rightwing conspiracy, its public-minded spirit serves the same cause—it helps to increase outrage.

The true secret of the Great Backlash in moving the working-class rightward is, Frank argues, that voting Republican or Democrat has become separated from economic issues. Frank does not argue that working-class voters are being duped on the economic issues, but rather they are not given any reason by either party to think in terms of them. The plen-T-plaint keeps voters primed on social issues, but not any old social issues—ones that only seem to move in the wrong direction. Frank goes so far as to argue that politicians on the Right actually like it that way, a claim hard to substantiate and perhaps a bit too cynical for even the hardest members of the Left to digest completely, but his point is well-taken. Much like the politician who promises to support term limits and vows to stay in office until she sees them enacted, the secret of the Backlash politicians is that their hardest-core supporters will never be satisfied, and will send them back election after election with *carte blanche* to act as they will on other issues.

Perversely enough, those other issues, such as cutting taxes on the wealthy and creating a more “business friendly” environment are not exactly disconnected from the social problems that cause members of the Backlash to get so angry. The skimpy outfits girls starve themselves to squeeze into, the violent first-person-shooter games young men spend hours playing, let alone the sex and violence that fills our radios, televisions and movie screens are brought to us by the free market that the Right loves so much. The Supreme Court does not force Americans to hand their money over at the movie theaters, or to the clothing stores at the mall. Liberals do not jump for joy every time skirts go up by an inch, but the shareholders of the companies producing them do, and these are the very same people Backlash politicians feel the need to protect with tax cut after tax cut. “Ordinary working-class people are right to hate the culture we live in,” notes Frank (133). Culture mocks middle America for being crass dullards cluelessly traipsing through life. “Conservatives are good at pinpointing and magnifying these small but legitimate cultural grievances. What they are wrong about are the forces that create the problem” (134). It is not that liberals have no place for middle America, it is that the New Economy does not. It needs cheap labor, or mind-workers who eschew tradition in order to think outside the box. In the world of the “boundariless career,” workers must be mobile and lack ties to community or even employer. It needs buyers who chase their products not because they need them, but because they want them, they desire them: the latest fashion, the slimmest cell phone, the beer that will make you more of an individual. In short, it needs the very person conservative traditionalists are not.

But the backlash can never see it that way. Our culture [they believe] is the way it is simply because liberals have made it so. And this is the logical terminus of backlash reasoning. When you have rejected all the accepted social science methods for understanding the way things work, when you can't talk straight about social class, when you can't acknowledge that free-market forces mightn't always be for the best, when you

can't admit the validity of even the most basic historical truths, all you're left with are these blunt tools: journalists and sociologists and historians and musicians and photographers do what they do because they are liberals (134-135).

The Summer of Mercy, an Eternity of Republicans

A good source to start for an understanding of the religious Right's entrance into politics is Allen Hertzke's (1993) work on Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson. In its simplest form, the two ministers ran for president in the same year, and showed evangelical Christians at both ends of the political spectrum that being active in politics was a form of focusing on the spiritual, since politics helped determine what actions in one's private life were pursuable and which ones were not. Thus, 1988 was a baseline year, the year when a previously un-mobilized portion of the polity opened itself to political participation. But the fact that a segment of the polity *can* be mobilized, of course, does not mean they will be (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Frank makes an important additional contribution, by showing how the religious were brought into politics in Kansas. The one singular event, more important than any other, was The Summer of Mercy, 1991.

The fact that *Roe v. Wade* gave women the right to an abortion did not guarantee that they had access to one. In Kansas, finding access to a clinic that offered late-term abortions was extremely difficult, and the only place within hundreds of miles for many women was in Wichita, in a clinic operated by Dr. George Tiller. Following boycotts in Atlanta in 1988 and Los Angeles in 1990, the pro-life group Operation Rescue targeted Tiller's clinic for protests in 1991. Wichita was the perfect battleground for the right-to-life campaign. The abortion clinic was located in the heart of a city that was heavily Christian, and conservative Christian at that. "The protesters meant to make this contradiction manifest—to force one aspect of the Kansas identity to clash with another—to set up a conflict so unresolvable that everyone in the state would eventually have to choose up sides and join the fight" (92). The grapes of wrath were ripe for the picking. Kansans did choose up sides, and the anti-abortion front found recruits coming out of the woodwork. They descended on the city like locusts called by Moses, blocking streets, chaining themselves across sidewalks, and even throwing themselves under cars.

As if God himself sent the protesters a miracle, the clinics of Wichita turned off their lights, locked their doors, and stopped operating for an entire week. This was on advice of the city's police, but to the other side, it was the greatest victory they ever could have asked for. They came to town to shut down the abortion mills, and they succeeded! When the clinics re-opened a week later, it only fanned the flames. The mailing list of Kansans for Life grew by over ten thousand names in just six weeks after the shutdown. When the organizers of the Summer of Mercy scheduled a mass meeting at the Wichita State University football stadium,

they only reserved half of it, expecting somewhere around seven thousand people to attend. Much to their surprise, more than twenty-five thousand citizens signed up, selling out every seat in the stadium. The audience heard phone calls from members currently in the city's jails for civil disobedience. Pat Robertson called them to action, and they heeded his call.

The Summer of Mercy activated a segment of the population that had previously remained out of politics, dividing the Republican party in two. The moderate, economic wing suddenly found itself being challenged for supremacy by the new conservative, socially oriented wing. Career politicians lost in the primaries to more conservative neophytes. Working-class Kansans started attending rallies where they were mobilized into action by plainspoken leaders... Thus was a new populist movement born.

The Punch Line

Frank makes a bold claim at the end of the book, and one that has gotten many a centrist Democrat's knickers in a twist. Frank claims that the rise of the Republican right can be pegged as much on the actions of the Democrats as it has the Republicans. Working-class Americans have been primed to select their politicians on social issues for the simple reason that no one is talking about economic ones. For obvious reasons listed above, Backlash talking heads steer clear of this minefield. Frank complains that Democrats have unwisely chosen to do so as well.

It began with Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council. The strategy was to follow a Downsian model and move the party as close to the Republicans as possible. This the party certainly did, "mending welfare" without ending it, talking about the demise of big government and of deficits. The strategy worked well for Clinton, and nobody else in the party since then. Under his watch, Democrats ended a forty-year period of the being the majority party in the House, and have been unable to make much headway in the Senate, losing seats in the most recent election at that. While the Democrats may or may not have known who Anthony Downs was (Clinton was a political science major, after all!), few had likely heard of William Riker. Riker understood the concept of "heresthetics," or of shifting from one issue cleavage to another to gain a partisan advantage. This is precisely what the Republican party has done, and with much success so far. Until the Democrats learn to begin talking about class again—and John Edwards' primary campaign indicates they can have success in doing so—the Republicans will continue to eat their lunch, Frank argues.

What's the Matter with America?

Frank has done a wonderful job of presenting a thorough case study addressing what seems to be an important paradox: Why do working-class citizens vote against their financial interests? As with any case study, assuming it has been conducted properly, the challenge remains for the author to put the piece into the larger context. At first glance, “the larger context” would seem to be the national one, and in the following section I argue this certainly needs to happen. However, my own belief is that the context in which this book really needs to be placed is an historical one. In the final section of this essay, I argue that this book takes on additional layers of meaning when understood properly placed in time, and when this happens what we see is that Frank has captured the politics of a nation in the midst of a Great Awakening. This has important implications our understanding of the events Frank’s description has captured.

Placing the Book in a National Context

In England the book is sold under the title, *What's the Matter with America?* This title begs a question. Assuming Frank has the narrative correct, how of much of this book describes America outside of Kansas? *How might we know if Frank's explanation applies elsewhere?* Frank supports his argument by looking at political discourse in Kansas. There is not one regression table in this book on political behavior, and only one reference that I was able to catch in the text to the census. If he has ever heard of the National Election Study, he has kept that fact to himself. Yet Frank employs the thick research to develop a rich narrative that much quantitative work often feels lacking. He describes what columnists were saying in the papers. He looks at what churches were doing. He drives down streets, describing what he saw, and interviews elected officials across the state and the political spectrum, building layer upon layer of description and analysis that by the end strikes the reader as pretty much right, even if perhaps a bit exaggerated. In the Acknowledgements at the end of the book, Frank says the following:

My research assistants were of critical importance. Jenny Ludwig read several years' worth of *Wichita Eagles* on my behalf, while Andy Nelson spent many an hour digging up obscure facts. Mike O'Flaherty helped with the broad theoretical framing of the project, offering fascinating accounts of the basic sociological texts on the backlash (296).

Frank is describing the process of conducting thick analysis, of coming to such a deep understanding of an event that a series of seemingly unconnected events start to pull together into a coherent whole. This is the kind of knowledge

that allows one to be able to step into quantitative analysis, should one desire, and feel confident one's theories are well-founded, and that the questions being asked of macro-level data are connected to the reality they purport to capture, or to employ further qualitative analysis with some comfort that the bigger picture will be a fairly complete one. Frank even offers us a precise moment when the Great Backlash emerged as a political force. But maybe Kansas really is different. Frank himself notes that, historically, the Sunflower State was more ready than most to adopt new populist themes.

This is one place that members of our own profession can make a significant contribution, using the tools of our trade to test in a more robust manner the claims Frank makes.³ We could even do so through our teaching. One very nice project would be to have students study whatever state they are currently in. What do the census data and NES studies tell them about the political behavior of the state's residents? Can we pinpoint with any accuracy who the one-in-five voters deciding over moral issues are? How can quantitative analysis contribute to this study? What challenges does it offer Frank's thesis? Does it buttress it in substantive ways? At their best, quantitative and qualitative analysis complement one another, after all. This should be coupled with strong qualitative studies of other state Backlashes, tracing electoral histories of state legislators and careers of activists.

Frank argues *The Summer of Mercy* was the event that mobilized the previously docile Christians of Kansas into action. His timeline fits in comfortably with a literature pointing to the primary campaigns of Robertson and Jackson three years prior. But what about other states which lacked a single event such as the one that took place in Wichita? If the abortion protests brought out Kansans, what brought out the Right in other states? Did the protests lead to a greater mobilization than in other states? (This has serious implication for right-wing political entrepreneurs if it is true!) Perhaps looking at other states may cast doubt on Frank's claim regarding the origins of the Backlash, which could lead to discussions about where and whether Frank himself may have gotten things wrong.

A convincing argument is different from one that has been tested robustly and compared to other states. If Frank's depiction of politics in Kansas is correct (as I suspect that, with certain modifications it is), the thesis merits comparative study in other parts of the country, and in a far more robust manner as well. There is however, a danger of thinking of this book solely in the contemporary perspective. Frank has captured an important moment in contemporary politics,

³ Indeed, existing empirical data indicate that nationally, class voting remains as distinct as ever, and that Kansas has traditionally been more Republican than Frank depicts (although, as he does note, of a more moderate variety).

but one, I argue, that can only be understood fully by placing it in the proper historical context.

Putting the Book in Historical Context

Just as the book opens opportunities to think about the larger American polity, rather than just Kansas, it also opens the chance to think about today's politics in a larger historical perspective—far larger, in fact, than just looking at populism a century ago and today. Frank's method of comparing the two populist periods is clever and useful, as it shows both the contrast between the movement from the Left and the movement from the Right while also shedding light on the commonalities. What shines through so clearly is the religious underpinning not just to the contemporary uprising, but to the one a century ago as well—and this despite all the rhetoric about class warfare.

Participants in the two populist movements describe their experiences in terms of epiphanies, pentecosts, and *awakenings*. Here is where political historians can truly add to the contribution Frank has made, since what he has captured so adequately really were awakenings—Great Awakenings, as they are called—and they are part of a much larger history than Frank's framework captures.

America is currently experiencing its "Fourth Great Awakening," where, as with the others, the lived experiences no longer comport with the moral framework many Americans hold, and they mobilize in response. The Populist movement of a century ago was part of the Third Great Awakening, and when seen from this perspective, a whole new set of insights open before us.

The Four Great Awakenings

Americans have always thought in terms of moral politics, sometimes more so, sometimes less (Morone 2003). Moral politics brought government into citizen's bedrooms during the Salem witch hunts, it brought the jeremiads that lit the spark for many abolitionists (Bercovitch 1978), it changed the way the nation has treated generations of immigrants (Smith 1997). Moral politics have influenced the ways the poor have been conceived of (Katz 1996), the ability of residents to pursue the good life through regulating their financial transactions (Glenn 2000), and the civil liberties Americans are willing to forsake to protect themselves from the dangerous "other" of the moment, be they witches, communists, or terrorists.

Without depicting the multiplicity of backgrounds and outlooks of Americans throughout history as static or unitary, the nation's formal religions, especially Christian ones, have always had a tremendous impact on popular culture. When the religious interpretations of the day fail to comport with the lived experiences

of a large segment of the polity, a window of opportunity opens for entrepreneurs to challenge the dominant paradigms and offer new ones (Glenn 2004). When an idea catches on among a major segment of the population and leads to a religious uprising, the result is a Great Awakening. There have been three so far, and at the moment, there is strong reason to believe that we are in the middle of the fourth. At the risk of failing to do each justice, I will describe each one briefly, for doing so tells us something important about the political event Frank has captured so well.

The First Great Awakening made its political impact felt in the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Calvinist doctrine of predestination came under challenge by those who believed anyone could find grace by acts of charity after having been “born again.”⁴ By the 1760s, this led to attacks on British moral and political corruption. The idea of divine providence (under which the British monarch ruled) came to be challenged by those who believed in natural rights, such as those found to be self-evident by the revolutionaries. In part, the First Great Awakening made conceiving of a government based on the sovereignty of the people possible.

The Second Great Awakening picked up the unresolved dispute from the First, with the question of predestination once again coming under fire from those who held that grace came from “determined inner and outer struggle against sin” (Fogel 2000, 21). To someone who holds such a belief, a logical conclusion to reach is that the sum of all this personal striving for perfection should result in social perfection as well. The temperance movement in large part was made possible by this conception, as was abolitionism. In the political phase of the Second Great Awakening (roughly 1840-1870), thirteen states prohibited the sale of alcohol, compulsory education rose on the agenda, as did limits on child labor, along with women’s suffrage. Poverty was still seen by many as the wages of sin, but what we also see emerging is the idea that poverty had certain structural causes as well.

The Third Great Awakening began at the end of the nineteenth century (where Frank’s narrative begins), and for our purposes, its most important impact was that the nation’s major evangelical churches came to reject the notion that being poor was a wage of sin. This opened a large segment of the polity to the possibility that government could actively address structural poverty. For the liberal members of the debate (who for the most part came out of the top), God’s laws were equated with the laws of nature, opening “social problems” to study for scientific solutions. For members of the Social Gospel Movement, as many liberals came to call themselves, poverty was due not simply to personal failure, but to failure of society to protect its weakest. Poverty moved from being a

⁴ I am heavily indebted to William Fogel (2000) for the summary that follows.

personal to being social sin, laying an often-overlooked theological basis for the welfare state that was to follow.

At the core of each Awakening was a question of equality. Did all have the power to achieve grace, or was to be enjoyed merely by the elect? Did all have rights, or did God desire humans to abide in a hierarchy? What was the cause of poverty, and what did Americans owe to those in need? While avoiding any sort of whiggish notion of an inevitable forward march, each Great Awakening led to a more egalitarian society, as members of the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum found in their religious beliefs a justification for their demanding a more equal footing with the elite they saw above them. Frank's story starts with the Third Great Awakening but, as one can see, it is actually part of a much larger picture.

Placed in this perspective, we are offered a new interpretation of Frank's claim that today the worst off are being driven by religion to harm their financial positions, instead of moving them in the other, more egalitarian direction. First, history suggests that being in the working class today is far different than in the past. A century ago, even "fully employed" wage earners (who usually were not fully employed by today's standards) often could still not afford adequate housing, enough food to eat, or proper clothes to wear (Chapin 1909, Houghteling 1927, Squier 1912). By the standards of any period in American history prior to the New Deal, the individuals that Frank focuses on are not poor in the same sense. The individuals he writes about have adequate food, housing and clothing. In fact, Frank repeatedly notes that the most active members of the Backlash frequently make great financial sacrifices to achieve their moral goals—hardly a luxury open to those who truly are poor today. The poverty felt by the members of the Backlash is best conceived of as a form of *spiritual poverty*: the inability to live the lifestyles their morality dictates relative to the lives the "liberal elite" are able to live, given their morality. From this perspective, the Backlash certainly is an egalitarian uprising, and one that addresses the poverty experienced by its supporters in patterns similar to previous Awakenings.

Frank's analysis makes much more sense when put in this perspective. Recall the elements of the Backlash he lists: authenticity, anti-intellectualism, a focus on the day-to-day offenses that strip daily life of its greater meaning, and a disconnection of morals from economics. This all makes much more sense in the context of a Great Awakening—in fact, it is exactly what we would expect from a segment of the population that is experiencing a disconnect between the way the world should be and the way the world is, and feels that a democratic uprising informed by faith can do something about it.

If this historical perspective is correct, and what Frank has captured is a political effect of a Fourth Great Awakening, then this has serious implications for his conclusions. Frank argues that Democrats can regain their appeal with the

religious segment of America's working class who are currently voting Republican by renewing a focus on class interests. But if that primary force behind what he has called the Backlash is in fact a powerful egalitarian uprising for greater ability to pursue the moral life of one's choosing, Frank's recommendation to the Democratic party will be irrelevant. Individuals voting according to moral criteria are not necessarily being duped, rather, they have a different set of priorities and are rationally acting upon them. Members of the Backlash want changes to the moral code of the nation, and economic palliatives will not appease them. While the Republican party has so far been the beneficiary of the Backlash, attempts to continue offering little more than symbolic politics may also backfire, should members of the Backlash come to start demanding concrete results. Meeting those demands would entail unraveling more than a half-century's worth of First Amendment jurisprudence on religion and the state—something G.O.P. leaders would most likely be both unwilling and unable to accomplish.

Neither party is currently in a position to address the demands of the Backlash. Should the movement continue to gain momentum, we will see great pressure on the parties to realign along new cleavages—ones that could benefit the Democratic party with its traditional concern for social justice just as easily as it could benefit the Republican party. In any event, one thing history tells us is very clear: Great Awakenings have a tendency to surprise and overwhelm the dominant coalitions of the era, altering the political landscape profoundly along the way.

Conclusion

Thomas Frank had a great idea: study a populist movement in one state. Go into the movement in great depth, and use the case study to understand the paradox of why a portion of America's worst-off vote against their financial interests. His method of analysis was to compare what he calls the Backlash of today to the last populist movement to sweep through Kansas a century ago. The comparison between the two generates fascinating insights, leading Frank to conclude that the movement of workers from the Democratic to the Republican party has been the result of reframing politics along moral lines. The method by which this happened was to provide a constant list of problems with society, and point to a distant liberal elite as the source of the problem.

Since it addresses a political science question without employing many of the standard methods of inquiry, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* presents a wonderful opportunity for political scientists to place this book in the larger national picture. In the end however, to place this book in the proper perspective, we not only need to move from local to national, but even more importantly, to

place the piece in the larger historical picture. What Frank has captured is in large part the political manifestation of the Fourth Great Awakening, and his book yields a window of opportunity for placing contemporary politics in a larger historical context—which for Great Awakenings entails placing moral politics at center stage.

The contribution Frank has made in this thought-provoking and approachable book is important one—but one whose ultimate value rests in the ability of others to place in it in the larger context of American political history.

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