
Book Review

Unfortunately, It's Not Just Kansas

by Harley Schlanger

What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America

by Thomas Frank

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My faith plays a big part in my life. . . . I pray a lot. . . . And my faith is a very, it's very personal. . . . I love the fact that people pray for me and my family all around the country. Somebody asked me how I know? I said I just feel it.

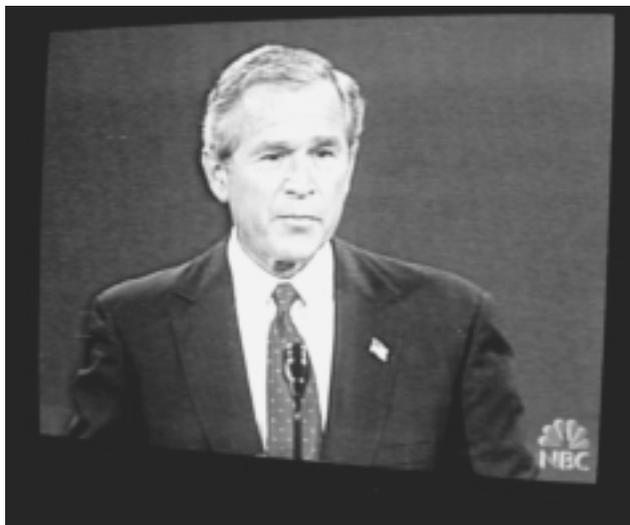
—George Bush, in the third Bush-Kerry debate, Oct. 13, 2004

The deafness of the conservative rank and file to the patent insincerity of their leaders is one of the true cultural marvels of the Great Backlash.

—Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*

A satirist might dismiss the above quote from President George Bush with the quip that, since he took office in January 2001, a growing number of Americans have turned to prayer! Unfortunately, with Bush locked in a close race with Sen. John Kerry for a second term, despite the obvious, unprecedented failures during his first four years, the pleasure one might derive from the quip is overwhelmed by the deeper horror implicit in the prospect of another four years. Given his record of lies leading to an unsuccessful prosecution of the “war on terror,” which has made the world more dangerous, and his evident callous disregard for the well-being of the majority, demonstrated by economic policies which have achieved historic levels of income for the upper 2% of the population, while plunging millions of working families to below-poverty levels, how is it possible that Americans might vote for Bush again?

Or, more to the point, what is behind the mathematics of the red state/blue state phenomenon that is at the heart of



While millions of working families have plunged into poverty during his first Administration, how is it possible that Americans might vote for Bush again?

the scheming of both campaigns, not to mention the endless insipid commentaries of the talking heads? Why are people who work for a living, and who are suffering mightily from the broad effects of the free-trade ideology practiced by the Bush Administration, planning to vote for an extension of the very policies which have done great harm to themselves, their families, their communities, and the nation?

This is the subject of a very insightful, must-read book written by Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Frank examines what he calls the “Great Backlash,” as it transformed his home state from being on the cutting edge of 19th Century radical movements (for example, the Abolitionism of John Brown, prohibition, and pitch-fork Populism), to its current position as “a center of cultural rebellion” within the conservative right today.

The ‘Great Backlash’

Frank’s central thesis is that there has been a fundamental change, a kind of inversion, in U.S. politics since the late 1960s, in which a new kind of conservatism has captured voters who previously had seen the Democratic Party as their home. These voters were drawn to the Democrats on economic issues, as the legacy of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal—with Social Security, the minimum wage, health care, support for collective bargaining (that is, unions) and so on—had been the basis for their economic security. This was a world in which the “little men,” the blue-collar workers and farmers, were given protection, by the government, from the predators of Wall Street and their corporate allies, who had been attempting, since the death of FDR, to chip away at this protective layer.

Following their notable lack of success during the years



Forget the economy, the corporate conservatives tell the “little people”; it’s all about “values.” Here, a Promise Keepers Rally in Washington, D.C. in 1997.

1945 to 1968, the conservatives changed their tactics, shifting away from direct confrontation over economic issues, to so-called cultural issues. This sleight-of-hand has worked, spectacularly, as the “little people” have embraced those who are now profiting at their expense.

Frank describes this change as follows: “For decades Americans have experienced a populist uprising that only benefits the people it is supposed to be targeting,” that is, the “elites” who control the lives of the people. This “Great Backlash . . . first came snarling onto the national stage in response to the partying and protests of the late sixties. While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues.”

The new conservatives speak of “values” when they campaign, but once in office, “the only old-fashioned situation they care to revive is an economic regimen of low wages and lax regulation.” This new conservatism has “smashed the welfare state, reduced the tax burdens on corporations and the wealthy, and generally facilitated the country’s return to a nineteenth century pattern of wealth distribution. Thus the primary contradiction of the backlash: It is a working-class movement that has done incalculable historic harm to working-class people.”

Who Are the ‘Elites’?

There is a profoundly sharp irony, which Frank identifies as central to the emergence of the Great Backlash, which has served as the basis for this transformation, or inversion, in U.S. politics. It revolves around the idea that “liberals” are in total control of our nation! (This infantile paranoia is now featured in the increasingly desperate Bush campaign rhetoric, following the disastrous performance by the President in

the first debate. “John Kerry is a ‘liberal,’ and therefore ‘outside the mainstream,’ ” he repeats, obsessively. Kerry’s effective counter in the first debate to charges that he is a “flip-flopper” left Bush’s handlers with no choice but to play the liberal card.)

The use of the term “liberal” to define the enemy image has been an essential feature in the success of the Great Backlash. Identified by Frank as part of the “repackaging of class,” he writes, “Our culture and our schools and our government, backlashers insist, are controlled by an overeducated ruling class that is contemptuous of the beliefs and practices of the masses of ordinary people. . . . They [the liberal elites] are arrogant. They are snobs. They are liberals.”

While this argument is nauseatingly familiar to anyone who has heard the droning of the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Anne Coulter, or any of the interchangeable whiners on the Fox News Channel, Frank points to this as part of the anti-intellectual tradition going back to the thirties, when, according to the creators of the backlash, “Franklin Roosevelt turned a flock of college professors loose on the economic structure of the nation. Intellectuals designed the New Deal’s regulatory apparatus, they set up Social Security, they did studies and wrote reports, all of which was regarded by the business community of the time as inexcusable and arrogant meddling with the rights of private property.”

The psychological terror unleashed by Sen. Joseph McCarthy was a second burst of this kind of anti-intellectualism. These two moments cultivated the belief that “the intellectuals were the ones betraying capitalism, while the working class . . . was standing tall for the American way.”

Yet, this anti-intellectualism, which claimed that the Democrats were governing on behalf of an oppressive, “lib-

eral” elite which was out of touch with the majority, failed to create a new political paradigm. This is where Frank is particularly acute in his analysis, as he demonstrates how the “new” conservatives succeeded in imposing a counter-intuitive political revolution, by convincing those who benefited materially from the New Deal policies, that the backers of the New Deal were really their oppressors!

This inversion was accomplished through what Frank calls “a critical rhetorical move: the systematic erasure of the economic.” The “great goal of the backlash is to nurture a cultural class war, and the first step in doing so . . . is to deny the economic basis of social class.” Only by this “erasure” could George Bush, the pampered son of a financial dynasty, who graduated from the leading elite institutions of the nation, be presented as “one of the people.”

From Economic Security to Family Values

Frank is brutally hilarious in developing this irony, the idea that the nation’s financial elites are the defenders of the little people against the “powerful liberal elite.” In the face of the massive dislocation which resulted from the post-1964 new economic paradigm, through the merger of post-industrialism with the new consumerism, the conservative movement succeeded in enlisting the victims of this collapse as foot-soldiers in creating a better world—for Wall Street looters!¹

While this process had been under way since Nixon, it escalated during the Presidency of Bush 41. In Kansas, it was the Summer of Mercy of 1991, run by Operation Rescue in Wichita, which finished off the old, pragmatic Republicans, such as former Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, replacing them with the likes of the born-again Sam Brownback. In an address to the Congress in 1996, then-Congressman Brownback asked rhetorically, what are the most pressing concerns of his constituents: “Are they the problems associated with the economy or problems associated with values?” By a margin of eight or nine to one, he answered, “they will say the problems are moral.”

This conservative movement presented Kansans with a phony alternative to their perceived impotence in the face of the changes after 1968, giving them “an attractive and even a



Rush Limbaugh, one of the “Great Backlash” moralists who tell people that it’s in their own interest to support “American” policies—that just happen to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.

seductive way of dealing with an unfair universe,” one which offered a “ready-made identity . . . combined with the narcissism of victimhood.” The new conservatives called on them to join the fight to “preserve family values” against the all-powerful elites who are attempting to impose their liberal values on “Middle Americans.”

Brownback, along with Rep. Jim Ryun and former Representative Tiahrt, owe their elections to this change. Frank describes them as right-wing religious extremists, but with an ironic twist: They are each “as dedicated an apostle of the free-market doctrine as they are of the teachings of Jesus.” The leaders of the backlash “may talk Christ, but they walk corporate. . . . Values may ‘matter most’ to voters,” Frank argues, “but they always take a backseat to the needs of money once the elections are won.”

Who, after all, has been the beneficiary of this new conservatism? While the financial and corporate elites have seen their taxes reduced and their incomes soar as a result of such “democratic” reforms as tax cuts, free trade, deregulation, and privatization, the 80% of the population in the lower income brackets has been hit hard with lost jobs and farms, unaffordable health care, lower wages, declining benefits, higher tuition, and so on.

1. Although it is beyond the scope of this review, Frank’s previous book, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy* (Doubleday, November 2000), addresses the economic side of this inversion. Frank details how Wall Street financiers and their army of propagandists created the myth that the “market” is the ultimate democratic force, and that “freeing” the market from the oppression of protectionism and regulations has opened the possibility that all Americans can become wealthy. This is what apologists for Bush call the “opportunity society,” or “shareholder values,” while opponents correctly point out that so-called free-market reforms, in reality, have increased the gap between rich and poor, by “privatizing profit and socializing risk.” Further, anyone who attacks the results of the “democratic processes” of the market (for example, the popularity of fast food or bobble-head dolls) is identified as an elite snob, who rejects popular culture, as certified by “market share,” and is accused, instead, of trying to impose *his* culture!

In short, Frank has convincingly demonstrated that the majority of Kansans, who are voting for the Bush-Cheney new conservatives, *have been had!* The “true believers, the average folk who have been driven by what they see as the tyranny of the lawyers, the America-haters at Harvard, the professional politicians in Washington, or the eviction of God from public space,” have been used by the “opportunists,” the “professional politicians [such as Senator Brownback] and lawyers and Harvard men who have discovered in the great right-wing groundswell an easy shortcut to realizing their ambitions.”

Thus, Frank concludes, Kansas voters have been manipulated into willfully choosing self-destructive policies. “American conservatism depends for its continued dominance and even for its very existence on people never making certain mental connections about the world, connections that until recently were treated as obvious or self-evident everywhere on the planet.”²

Can Kansas Be Saved?

In his discussion of the “erasure of the economic,” Frank correctly places blame on the Democratic Party, which, under the influence of the Democratic Leadership Council, “has long been pushing the party to forget blue collar voters and concentrate instead on recruiting affluent, white collar professionals who are liberal on social issues. . . . Like the conservatives, they take economic issues off the table,” seeking instead corporate contributions. Frank calls this “triangulation” policy, which was adopted by the Democrats in the 1990s, a “criminally stupid strategy,” by which they have left those who would otherwise vote against the conservatives open to manipulation by sleazy corporate and financial interests disguised as “cultural warriors.”

It is one of the shortcomings of his book that Frank does not offer a real solution to this problem. He acknowledges a certain sympathy with the late-19th Century Populists, and brings along with it a kind of post-Marxian sociology, in his discussion of “class.” Thus, he leaves his reader in the proverbial fishbowl, forced to choose between a predatory

2. On the point about being manipulated: In discussing the economic losses suffered by the working poor as a result of their misguided alliance with Wall Street, Frank comments that, for all the focus on social issues by Bush, et al., there have been no gains made in the agenda of the religious right; for example, on stopping abortions, reversing gay rights, and so on. This point is reinforced in a recent op ed by Glen Harold Stassen, Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. Self-described as pro-life, Stassen and his co-author, Gary Krane, write that a study of 16 states showed a significant *increase* in abortions since Bush became President (14.6% average), while only four studied showed a modest 4.3% decline.

Their conclusion is that economic issues are the cause of the increase. “Economic policy and abortion are not separate issues; they form one moral imperative. Rhetoric is hollow, mere tinkling brass, without health care, insurance, jobs, child care, and a living wage. Pro-life in deed, not merely in word, means we need a president who will do something about jobs, health insurance and support for mothers” (*Houston Chronicle*, Oct. 17, 2004).

conservative movement, which pays homage to family values—while destroying the family—and a vague, stereotypical pre-1968 liberalism.

The only way out of this fishbowl is for the Democratic Party to take up the challenge posed by former Presidential pre-candidate Lyndon LaRouche, whose extensive writings on FDR and the New Deal provide the alternative. Although Frank refers to Roosevelt several times in his book, it is more as a nod to an icon than to a living approach which offers a unique way out of the present disintegration of the financial system, which is, after all, responsible for the collapse in living standards of the majority of Americans.

In particular, LaRouche’s treatment of the Constitutional principle of the “General Welfare,” both as intended by Benjamin Franklin and the Founding Fathers, and as reinvigorated by FDR to fight the Coolidge-Hoover Depression, is the way out of the box created by the false alternatives of the dog-eat-dog social Darwinist conservatism of today’s “New Right,” and the share-the-wealth nostrums of today’s toothless liberals. Frank would do himself, and his legions of admirers, a big favor were he to study the writings of LaRouche in the ground-breaking work he commissioned, *The Children of Satan*—especially the section on how the Congress of Cultural Freedom led the attack on FDR and the conception of the General Welfare—so he would be more effective in his advocacy of the defeat of today’s bankers’ fascist movement.³

I have one final quibble with the author. Frank makes repeated references to the religious hypocrisy lurking behind the Jesus-talking, corporate-walking types. He even has identified the core of the problem, with his references to the alliance between the “Latin-mass Catholics” with their single-issue focus on abortion, and the Elmer Gantry-style Protestant fundamentalists, who speak of loving their neighbor while rabidly pursuing their own personal deal with Jesus! However, he is a bit too kind in his handling of this problem.

Again, Frank should look to LaRouche for guidance on this, particularly in LaRouche’s Oct. 6, 2004 webcast, “The Issue of President Bush’s Mental Health.”⁴ In addressing the problem of what he calls “pseudo-Christian fundamentalism,” LaRouche pulls no punches: “This is not Christianity. And it’s important to recognize that it is not Christianity, not merely for factitious reasons, but because it is *not* Christianity!”

LaRouche continues, proving that one cannot promote the free-trade policy of Adam Smith, the British Empire, and today’s Wall Street, and still be considered a Christian. And one cannot impose that free-trade system through military threats and war, and still believe oneself to be a Christian—no matter how very, very personal that belief may be.

3. *Children of Satan*, published by Lyndon LaRouche PAC, August 2004. See especially section III, “The Sexual Congress for Cultural Fascism.”

4. Both the audio presentation and the transcript of LaRouche’s presentation of the Oct. 6, 2004 webcast are available at www.larouchepac.com.