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## A REPUBLICAN PROLETARIAT

**W**ITHIN TWO DAYS of Bush's 2004 election victory, Bill Clinton was making clear what direction the Democrats should now take. The party had to 'engage the American heartland in a conversation about religion and values'. Too many voters thought that Democrats did not believe in faith or family. Kerry had failed to condemn gay marriage with the ardour required—'He said it once or twice but not a thousand times, in small towns'—or to point out that abortions had fallen by over 20 per cent under the Clinton Administration, and had risen under Bush.<sup>1</sup> Was the Kerry campaign too 'liberal' to win? 'Maybe this time the voters chose what they actually want', exclaimed the *Nation's* Katha Pollitt. 'Nationalism, pre-emptive war, order not justice, "safety" through torture, backlash against women and gays, a gulf between haves and have-nots, government largesse for their churches . . .'<sup>2</sup>

At stake is not just the small but unmistakable rightward shift in voters' self-descriptions, with 'conservatives' up to 34 per cent from 29 per cent in 2000, and 'moderates' down from 50 to 45 per cent; nor that 'moral values' trumped the economy, the occupation of Iraq and terrorism as the top issue of the election campaign. It is the fact that so many of the voters that turned out to swell Bush's 3.5 million lead are blue-collar workers, those bearing the brunt of Republican policies. Only 61 per cent of trade unionists voted for Kerry; among white union members, the figure was lower still. The former mine-and-steelworkers stronghold of West Virginia went for Bush by 13 per cent. There were significant swings to the Republicans among middle-income women and latino voters, traditionally pro-Democrat groups.

In post-mortems of an election that seemed to many to defy political logic—a clear swing towards an Administration that has brought rising

unemployment, tax cuts for the super-rich and the murderous quagmire of occupied Iraq, among precisely those most likely to lose their jobs, their homes, their relatives in the military—Thomas Frank’s lively study of the ‘great backlash’ sweeping the country’s heartland has become a central reference point. American liberals have had trouble believing that the blue-collar/corporate-capital alliance is really happening, Frank argues: ‘For the Republican Party to present itself as the champion of working-class America strikes liberals as such an egregious denial of political reality that they dismiss the whole phenomenon’. The blue-collar Republican vote is explained away as ‘crypto-racism, or a disease of the elderly, or the random griping of religious rednecks, or the protests of “angry white men”’.

Frank knows, of course, that the Reagan-era backlash attracted a mountain of liberal comment, and cites Christopher Lasch and others to good effect. It was during the Clinton years that the phenomenon was wished away by the well-intentioned—and at the same time, as Frank shows, deepened and reinforced. *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* is a vivid and moving update, a depiction of the political mind and cultural yearnings of right-wing populism in a Great Plains state over the last fifteen years.<sup>3</sup> More generally, it offers a case-study in the flourishing of a party that talks about morality and religion in order to enact legislation that benefits big capital, at the expense of most of those who vote for it. Unlike more traditional forms of conservatism, characterized by deferential respect for the rich and powerful, this is a movement that:

imagines itself as a foe of the elite, as the voice of the unfairly persecuted, as a righteous protest of the people on history’s receiving end. That its champions today control all three branches of government matters not a whit. That its greatest beneficiaries are the wealthiest people on the planet does not give it pause.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘If we don’t make that argument, it is not surprising we are turned into two-dimensional aliens’, Clinton concluded. *Financial Times*, 6 November 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Katha Pollitt, ‘Mourn’, *Nation*, 22 November 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, New York 2004. The book has been marketed under the absurd title *What’s the Matter with America?* in the UK and Europe, with just the kind of crass commercial motive that all Frank’s work is a protest against. For a book, one of whose greatest strengths lies in the intimacy of its portrait of the state where the author grew up to be fanfared with airport inanity, because foreigners are presumed too ignorant to care about Kansas, is a peculiarly ironic fate: the price of best-sellerdom.

<sup>4</sup> *Kansas*, p. 6.

For Frank, this is the central contradiction of the backlash: 'it is a working-class movement that has done incalculable harm to working-class people'. For though 'values may "matter most" to the voters, they always take a backseat to the needs of money once the elections are won'. For decades, this has been right-wing populism's most consistent feature: 'Abortion is never halted. Affirmative action is never abolished.' Instead, the politicians swept into office by this grassroots rebellion have 'smashed the welfare state, reduced taxes for corporations and the wealthy, and generally facilitated the country's return to a nineteenth-century pattern of wealth distribution.'<sup>5</sup>

### *Little state on the prairie*

With the aim of examining the backlash from top to bottom—its theorists, its elected officials, its footsoldiers—Frank returns to his native Kansas, the geographical navel of the country. It is here, he argues, in the place where Superman grew up, where Dorothy was whirled away by the tornado, that we can best understand the forces that have pulled the us so far to the right. His book provides a striking socio-economic portrait of the 'reddest of the red states' at the turn of the 21st century (in fact, with a 62 per cent vote for Bush in 2004, Kansas ranks only eighth in redness; Utah, at 71 per cent, comes top). Its 2.7 million people, the vast majority of them white, closely parallel the demographics of the Republicans' electoral bastions.

The population of rural Kansas has been dwindling: agriculture lost over 20,000 jobs in the 1990s alone, falling from 6 to 3.8 per cent of the labour force, as the 1996 Freedom to Farm Act wiped out the last of the New Deal protections for small farmers. Many rural counties lost a quarter of their populations. Façades are boarded up along the Main Streets of small farming towns, and grass grows in the sidewalks; one community actually auctioned off its local school on eBay. Out to the west, the ill-named Garden City is one of the state's chief cow-butcher centres, which together boast a daily slaughter capacity of some 24,000 beasts. Frank describes the eerie farmland, the giant irrigation devices rolling around the vast cornfields, 'feedlots the size of cities that transform the corn into cowflesh' and the windowless concrete slaughterhouses that silently harvest the final product. Around them are the sprawling

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<sup>5</sup> *Kansas*, pp. 6–7.

trailer-park suburbs, unpaved and rubbish-strewn, where the mainly migrant workers provide cheap, non-unionized labour—caught, as Frank puts it, ‘on the steel hooks of economic logic just as surely and as haplessly as the cows they so industriously hack apart’. In Wichita, two hundred miles east, the aviation industry has shed half its union workforce. Unemployment is over 7 per cent and home foreclosures are soaring. Only the affluent Kansas City suburbs of Johnson County—‘cupcake land’—appear to be booming.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the state’s political scene presents ‘a panorama of madness and delusion worthy of Hieronymus Bosch’—one of:

sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in mid-western cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a rust-belt, will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover.

Kansas was not always a bastion of conservatism, and Frank summons up the state’s abolitionist, populist and New Deal past. Its early white settlers included militant opponents of slavery, John Brown and his sons among them, who aimed to block the westward expansion of Missouri slavocracy by armed force. Several decades later Carrie Nation was smashing up Kansas saloons with her hatchet, in the name of sobriety and the women’s cause. It was here that Eugene Debs accepted the Socialist Party’s nomination for president in 1908; Earl Browder, future Secretary-General of the American Communist Party, grew up in Wichita. Radical Populism swept the state in the 1890s. Kansans supported their Populist neighbour, William Jennings Bryan, in the pivotal election of 1896—but switched to William McKinley for his second term. Since then, in fact,

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<sup>6</sup> This is where Frank grew up, a teenage patriot who knew the name of every ship sunk at Pearl Harbour, and youthful Reaganite denouncing ‘creeping government regulation’ in high-school debates. It was the exclusionary elitism of Kansas University in the early 1980s that radicalized him, and sent him off to Chicago’s South Side; where, a decade later, he would be a founding editor of the *Baffler*. Frank recalls the Mission Hills area of his boyhood as having lapsed from 1920s grandeur into genteel decrepitude. Only with the CEO salary hikes and high stock returns of the 1990s did there come a new rash of Italianate porches, Olympic-size flowerbeds and multi-car garages, tended by armies of migrant labour.

the state has largely stayed in the Republican camp, with the exception of Wilson in 1912 and 1916, and Roosevelt in 1932 and 1936 (in the latter year against favourite son Alf Landon). By 1940 the state had returned to the Right, and Wendell Wilkie. The last time Kansas sent a Democrat to the Senate was in 1932; its last Democratic electors voted for Johnson in 1964; and only twice in its postwar history has the Kansas legislature had a Democratic majority.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, of course, Kansas provides a far-from-typical test case for the latest wave of backlash populism in the US, which elsewhere has been tipping states from blue to red.<sup>8</sup> But if Frank tends to elide the facts of Kansan exceptionalism, he gives an excellent portrait of its shift from red to reddest, from moderate to conservative Republican. The gruesome Summer of Mercy in 1991 was the turning point in the battle of the Mods and Cons. A Wichita clinic was targeted by anti-abortion activists who took over the town for a week to lie down in front of cars and rally, twenty-five thousand strong, in the local football stadium. The militant Cons gathered recruits for precinct committees all across the state. The following year, Cons swamped the Kansas Republican Party primaries and led a ferocious battle against the pragmatist Mod old guard, the RINOs—Republicans in Name Only.

Populist resentment was mobilized here, of course, against not Democratic but Republican 'liberal elites'. In Johnson County, the Cons have had most support in the areas with the lowest per-capita income and housing values, while the Mods still thrive among the manicured lawns of Mission Hills.<sup>9</sup> By 1994 the Kansas conservatives had a majority in the

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<sup>7</sup> Frank offers tantalizingly little explanation for the historically high concentration of religious fanaticism in Kansas in comparison with, say, Iowa or Nebraska. He mentions the Puritan background of the original white settlers, and Pentecostal arrivals in the 1940s and 50s, but plumps for environmental determinism: the constant howling wind, which drove the settlers insane, and the featureless landscape, 'capable of convincing anyone of their own cosmic insignificance'.

<sup>8</sup> As Mike Davis argued in these pages over a decade ago, it is the edge cities of the Sunbelt that have become the new Republican heartlands, deliberately boosted by Federal policies after inner-city spending was slashed from 1978. Mike Davis, 'Who Killed Los Angeles', *NLR* 1/197, Jan–Feb 1993.

<sup>9</sup> In their dreams, the Democratic Leadership Council may foresee the day when the old-fashioned Republican moderates flee the Sunbelt–Likud faction now in the ascendant in their party, into the Democrats' waiting arms. But why should they, so long as the GOP continues to deliver the goods?

state legislature's Republican bloc, as the warring factions consigned the Democrats to third-party status. In 1996, when the state's quintessentially Mod senior senator, Bob Dole, ran for president, the Arch-Con Sam Brownback won his vacated seat.<sup>10</sup>

Frank's explanation for these developments is above all cultural—or, as he puts it, 'culture war delivers the (economic) goods'. Frank has a good ear for the cadences of the right, and a strong stomach for the outpourings of its radio shows and effluvia of its columnists. He details the ways in which the conservative media stoke the indignation levels of an already resentful and self-righteous electorate, who have seen their economic existence eroded while their politicians demand but do not deliver the moral high ground. This is a receptive audience for the ventings of Rush Limbaugh, Gordon Liddy, Ann Coulter et al., and *What's the Matter with Kansas?* documents right-wing pundits' conscious cultivation of a 'plenty-plaint' mentality among white working-class Americans against a class enemy defined by its cultural and consumption patterns—the Volvo-driving, latte-drinking, *fromage*-eating liberal elite—not its position and role within the economic system; Weberian status rather than class.

This is familiar ground, but Frank's earlier work lays the basis for a more nuanced analysis. His 1997 *The Conquest of Cool* charted the ways in which the tropes and values of the 1960s counter-culture had been co-opted by corporate advertising and the media industry, voided of any subversive content and set to work for big business: hedonism, rebellion and free love used to sell autos and electric appliances to the baby-boomer generation. The counter-culture itself and the mass protests of the 1960s—anti-war, black power—had been used by the American establishment to stoke the reactionary backlash of Reagan populism, which took on not just the Left and the civil-rights movement but organized labour, too. Here Frank shows how even their commodified simulacra can still be pressed into

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<sup>10</sup> A recent recruit to Opus Dei, along with Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas and Rick Santorum, Brownback advocates assessing national culture in terms of 'gross domestic piety'. Having tirelessly denounced the role of big money in politics, he was materially assisted by a shadowy corporate front-group, Triad Management Services, in his 1996 Senate contest, and celebrated the resulting victory at a reception sponsored by us Telecom Association, 'a powerful lobbying group for an industry whose deregulatory agenda the senator would diligently advance in the years to come'. A scion of one of the state's wealthiest families, Brownback has mastered the required hokum and regularly refers to himself on the floor of Congress as 'a farm boy from Parker, Kansas'. *Kansas*, pp. 30, 74.

use for political ends, as advertising and entertainment-industry images of eroticized adolescent rebellion are tossed into a toxic ideological cocktail of out-of-control kids, black criminals, abortionists and sexual threat, deeply disturbing to an insecure Middle America.

### *The NAFTA effect*

But what clinched the alliance between defensive, atomized fractions of the working class and the traditional representatives of big business was, as Frank puts it, ‘the simultaneous suicide of the rival movement’. Politically, the final disintegration of the New Deal order had begun under Carter, whose response to economic stagnation, overseas setbacks and the ‘tax revolt’ of the white suburbs had been to slash inner-city programmes, deregulate telecoms, trucking and airlines, back Volcker’s interest-rate shock therapy at the Federal Reserve and stoke the Cold War in Afghanistan. Faced with a historic wave of plant closures, the AFL-CIO leadership restricted itself to shoring up pensions and watched its membership drain away. The consolidation of power by the Democratic Leadership Council following Reagan’s victory prevented any return to pre-1978 policies. The Rainbow Coalition was crushed or co-opted. New Democrats embraced welfare, health and education cuts and ‘tough on crime’ fear-mongering.

Helped into office by Ross Perot, Clinton was soon flailing. The Gingrich ‘Contract with America’ offensive successfully siphoned off corporate support and rallied Main Street small capital against his triangulated Health Plan. In 1994, for the first time in decades, the Republicans retook the House, boosted above all by the strength of the Cons in the Sunbelt suburbs. The Clinton Administration’s response was to woo the ‘new economy’ billionaires—venture capitalists, cyber barons, entertainment moguls and biotech wizards—scared off by the fundamentalism of the edge-city Republicans. NAFTA was the key to winning Seattle, Boston and Silicon Valley for the New Democrats. The AFL-CIO capitulated on free trade. Frank recounts the effects on the last labour stronghold of Wichita, Kansas, where Democratic representative Dan Glickman, a Clinton loyalist, backed the Agreement in the face of adamant grassroots opposition from the unionized Boeing workers who made up his base: ‘I couldn’t vote for him after that’, said one aircraft painter. ‘I know a lot of union members were really mad at Glickman when he voted for NAFTA.’ The blue-collar districts of south Wichita turned to the ultra-Con

Republican Todd Tiahrt, leaving Glickman the high-income east-side, where Republican Mods favoured his pro-choice line on abortion over that of their own party's candidate. As Wichita, so West Virginia, the hard-core DP state that cost Gore the election in 2000.<sup>11</sup>

### *Market euphoria*

The political shift was culturally reinforced by a broader, ideological move—the apotheosis of Clinton-era ‘market populism’, so memorably analysed by Frank in *One Market Under God*. The old-style backlash populism of the Cold War years, so successful in mobilizing a suburban and small-town electorate against the elitism and cultural depravity of the liberal establishment, rotten with pro-black politicians, pro-abortion judges, godless professors, anti-American high schools, etc., had never had much to say about the joys of the market. It was only under Clinton, Frank argues, that celebration of capitalism itself took centre stage in late-twentieth century American ideology: ‘the market as champion of the downtrodden Others of the planet’, empowering the little guy; a world in which ‘consumption is democracy’ and markets ‘represent a far more democratic form of organization than governments’. In this euphoric universe, manual labour had become obsolete and blue-collar workers were merely relics of a long-gone Fordist age. Instead, ‘knowledge workers’ were building the weightless economy of the new millennium. Paul Krugman hymned ‘the ascent of e-man’ at Enron, on whose board he sat, in *Fortune* magazine. The Bush Administration shrewdly exploited liberal denigration of labour with its paeans of praise to firefighters, construction workers and other proletarian heroes after 9.11.

There is some change of register, however, between *One Market under God* and *What's the Matter with Kansas?* Out of 250 pages depicting the phenomenon of blue-collar backlash that has led to the new Republican ascendancy, every one of sharp-eyed wit and humane intelligence, Frank devotes little more than a dozen to the Democratic Party. On the surface, these are caustic enough. The DLC's strategy of turning its back on working-class voters to court big corporations and affluent, white-collar constituencies deserves a large part of the blame for the latest backlash:

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<sup>11</sup> Locally, however, many blue-collar Bush voters continued to support the Democrats. In West Virginia, the DP won the governorship and two out of three congressional seats by nearly two-thirds majorities.



The way to collect the votes and—more important—the money of these coveted constituencies, ‘New Democrats’ think, is to stand rock-solid on, say, the pro-choice position while making endless concessions on economic issues, on welfare, NAFTA, Social Security, labour law, privatization, deregulation and the rest of it . . . Like the conservatives, they take economic issues off the table. As for the working-class voters who were until recently the party’s very backbone, the DLC figures they will have nowhere else to go. Besides, what politician in this success-worshipping country really wants to be the voice of poor people? Where’s the soft money in that?<sup>12</sup>

While the Republicans were industriously fabricating a class-based populism of the right, topped with tax cuts, the Democrats, ‘with a laugh and a sneer’, were consigning working-class issues and spokespeople to the dustbin of history. As a result of their ‘historic decision to remake themselves as the *other* pro-business party’, Democrats ‘no longer speak to the people on the losing end of a free-market system that is becoming more brutal and arrogant by the day’.<sup>13</sup>

At first glance, this looks like a robust enough critique of the Democrats. But there is an obvious question it fails to ask: why does the Democratic Party act the way it does? All Frank says is that the strategy that has dominated most of its thinking since the early seventies is ‘criminally stupid’. But is ‘stupidity’ really an intelligent political category? Or is it a bit dumbed-down itself? Its effect is to suggest that the Democrats have simply made a mistake: if only they would come to their senses and remember their true interests, they would turn back to workers and the least well-off, and become once again the party of solidarity and social progress. Yet it should surely be plain enough that the Democratic Party is a vehicle of reaction, not out of error or lack of wit, but because it is a machine largely controlled by the super-rich, who are perfectly capable of understanding their own interests.

For all his spirited retorts to hucksters like David Brooks, Frank flinches from acknowledging the core of cold truth in their legends and demagogic stereotypes. In the recent Presidential election, the Democrats picked the wealthiest individual since George Washington ever to run for the White House as their candidate, outgunned the Republicans 59 to 41 per cent among donors with assets over \$10 million, outspent Bush in every swing state of the Union, and hit an all-time financial record

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<sup>12</sup> *Kansas*, p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> *Kansas*, p. 245.

for a senatorial campaign: \$17 million in a failed attempt to get Daschle back on the Hill. Moreover, there is little that is new in this: since the nineties virtually all of the richest electoral districts in the country have been Democratic bastions, Clinton's cash-mountain easily topped Dole's in 1996, and the Democrats have regularly received larger individual donations than Republicans, whose strength has been among smaller donors. In this situation, workers who vote Republican may be less deluded than Frank seems to believe. Putting it in sociological language, since there is so little to choose 'instrumentally' between the two parties, each of them dedicated to capital unbound, why not at least get the satisfaction of voting 'expressively' for the one which seems to speak for their values, if not their interests?

If Frank sidesteps the political economy of the blue plutocracy, it is unlikely to be just out of tactical considerations. *What's the Matter with Kansas?* is a completely honourable book, free of any hint of the electoral pandering that has marred contributions like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*. Rather, what seems to have happened is that as a former Republican youngster of the Reagan era, Frank has reacted by vaguely idealizing Democratic rulers of an earlier age. More than once he intimates that 'forty years ago', the party was still a beacon of enlightenment, and indeed even now he can write that 'it is the Democrats who are the party of the workers, the poor, of the weak and the victimized. Understanding this, we think, is part of the ABCs of adulthood'. The weak link in his book, which runs through it like a wistful refrain, uniting past and present, is the broken-backed notion of American liberalism. Though he concedes that 'liberalism deserves a large part of the blame for the backlash phenomenon', he does not explain why this should be so, or whether it has anything to do with the nature of the phenomenon itself, rather than simply its decline. But it is enough to note that Frank can write of 'the things liberalism once stood for—equality and economic security' to realize that we are in the realm of historical mythology. Wilson, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson champions of equality! They would be turning in their graves. The Democratic Party and its 'liberalism': the great tradition of the Palmer Raids, Nisei camps, Loyalty oaths, Agent Orange in Vietnam, assassinations in Africa and coups in Latin America, not to speak of the ferocious protection of capital at home and abroad.

What has changed in recent years is not some falling away from earlier high ideals, but the social environment in which the Democratic elites

were once able to dominate the political system by combining captive electorates of incompatible character in the South and North, as the very capitalism the party enthusiastically whipped forward eventually undermined its grip on white rural voters in a rapidly industrializing South, and atomized its black and worker constituencies in the North. The result today has been a fatal hollowing out of the party on the ground. Ward, precinct and county structures are shells—rotten ones, in much of the South. Blue-collar voters have learned that they have very little to gain from the party. Along with black church and community organizations, the unions still constitute the closest thing the Democrats have got to a local political machine, but they have been desperately weakened, not only numerically (down to 13 per cent of the workforce nationally, a mere 3 per cent in the South) and politically, but also as a space where working-class education and solidarity could unfold.

In Ohio, JoAnn Wypijewski has reported, the Democrats had serious organization in nine counties; the Republicans had it in all eighty-eight. Instead, Kerry's 'air war' bombarded the electorate from 30,000 feet. America Coming Together, MoveOn.org and the other 527s bussed in white college kids and paid mercenaries to rust-belt towns with double-digit unemployment and high ex-convict levels, not to stay and help organize around community issues but to sign up votes for Kerry and get out.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the GOP has rebuilt itself nationally over the past decades and could mobilize nearly a million local party volunteers in 2004, with committees in over 3,000 US counties. Add to that the powerful conservative church organizations and it is easy to see why, with the electorate still more or less evenly divided, the Republicans can dominate all three branches of government.

Frank has offered some pungent advice to the Democrats in the wake of this debacle. Let us hope the next book this fine writer gives us will be as uncompromising a portrait of its massive edifice of sleaze and hypocrisy as he has provided for latter-day Republicans, without resort to the weasel L-word that is America's tarnished substitute for a Left. The two-fisted spirit of his feisty journal out of Chicago, the *Baffler*, is what a radical politics in the US most needs today.

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<sup>14</sup> JoAnn Wypijewski, 'The Wreckage', *Counterpunch*, vol. 11, no. 18, 24 Nov 2004.