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Winter 2005

Review of *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* By Thomas Frank

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Haider-Markel, Donald, "Review of *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* By Thomas Frank" (2005). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1411.

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What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America. By Thomas Frank. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004. 306 pp. Notes, index. \$24.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper.

In his latest book, Thomas Frank takes a sweeping look at the current state of American politics by using the conservative revolution in Kansas as a microcosm of what conservative Republicans have done nationally. Frank directs our attention to the highly effective myths, language, and tactics developed by conservatives over the past forty years that have convinced many citizens apparently to vote against their own economic interests.

Frank's central thesis is that conservatives have remade the American political landscape and captured the hearts and minds of middle America by focusing their rhetoric and (mostly unattainable) policy goals on culture war issues, such as abortion, media violence, homosexuality, and religion in public life, while also co-opting the traditional victimization language of the left. Frank argues that conservatives have made cultural issues central to American political debate by removing economic issues, pulling off this slight of hand by defining the elitist class not as the capitalists of old, but as coastal liberals, who include the educated elite, government bureaucrats, and the media. Complicit in this sweeping political maneuver are New Democrats who became pro-business in order to court wealthy but socially moderate Republicans.

Most of Frank's examples of how this process played out focus on Kansas. In particular he hones in on the takeover of the state's Republican party by conservatives beginning in the early 1990s. Historically, the Kansas Republican Party was dominated by what Frank calls mods, or the traditional Country Club Republican types. In the 1990s grassroots conservatives, whom he calls cons, began a movement to take over leadership positions in local Republican precincts. As they flexed their political muscle, with a strong focus on abortion and bringing religion back into public life, the mods took notice. Some mods tried to take the party back from the cons, but there were many, such as Senator Sam Brownback, who rode the wave the cons created and declared themselves part of what Frank deems the "Backlash."

Perhaps one of the most interesting and enlightening aspects of Frank's book is his ability to incorporate Kansas and Great Plains history into the present. He consistently shows modern Kansas conservative politics is really not new, even though historically it was liberals and progressives who rode waves of populist emotion on economic issues.

Frank has crafted an effective polemic with text that often flows like water. But he also documents the evidence for his arguments impeccably. Although he can at times sound conspiratorial, there is much here for casual historians and observers of American politics. *What's the Matter with Kansas?* is a wonderful read.

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