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Fall 2011

## Review of *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s*. By Robert Wuthnow

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Cantrell, Randolph, "Review of *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s*. By Robert Wuthnow" (2011). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1202.

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**Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s.** By Robert Wuthnow. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. xiii + 358 pp. Tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Shrinking farm numbers, population losses, and empty storefronts on Main Street have come to be seen as symptoms of an inevitable slide to oblivion for many Heartland communities. Empirical evidence of such decline is easily found, making the trend a favorite

topic for journalists. In *Remaking the Heartland*, Robert Wuthnow offers a very different interpretation of the same trends. His central argument is that Middle America (defined as eight states including most of the Great Plains) has been characterized by adaptation to changing social and economic realities in a way that has made the region a "more vibrant contributor to the national economy" today than it was a half-century ago.

Wuthnow does not deny the difficulties brought on by depopulation. But, rather than dwelling on nostalgia for the past or fretting over the future, he chooses to concentrate on the tenacity that has allowed many Heartland communities to survive and even prosper in the face of regional downsizing. To bolster his case, he calls upon a complex "multimethod" analysis using personal interviews; archival statistical data about individuals, communities, and counties; and local histories, events, and publications. The result is an interesting and scholarly mix of historical and sociological research.

Wuthnow does not attribute decline in the Heartland to any single cause or condition. In his analysis agriculture, drought, depression, transportation, technology, entrepreneurship, markets, wars, politics, public policy, and the aspirations of individuals and communities combine to weave a tapestry of change. Nothing is simple and linear. In fact, the author effectively debunks several simple explanations of decline through his analysis of archival data.

Although *Remaking the Heartland* emphasizes the period "since the 1950s," Wuthnow calls upon historical records from the late 19th through the early 21st centuries to tell the stories of numerous people and places. This results in a narrative that jumps back and forth through time and requires attentive reading in order to arrive at a summary conclusion that the author himself never exactly provides.

The appendix includes a series of 23 tables that are referenced but not discussed in the body of the book. Drawn from archival data, these tables include both simple descriptive profiles and multivariate models. For students of Middle American history these data provide a wealth of information, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the forces that have shaped the region. **Randolph L. Cantrell**, *University of Nebraska Rural Initiative, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.